スレイヤーズ すまっしゅ。

2 アカデミー・フェスタ

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SLAYERS SMASH! VOLUME 2
Academy Festival
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Academy Festival [Part 1]

When I closed the window, there was only darkness.

The classroom, which had been bustling with people during the day, was now submerged in the silence of the night. Within that newly born shadow, a single thin streak of light appeared. It was a makeshift lamp—nothing more than a stone enchanted with "Lighting" magic and wrapped in the edge of a cloak to keep the glow from leaking out.

I nudged the gap in the cloth open. The light illuminated the stone floor, crawled across the ground, climbed the wall, and suddenly brought a giant face into relief.

It had massive eyes and a mouth split wide open. Upon the bright red face, things that could have been either patterns or ancient crests were plastered.

".....Is that..... a mask.....?"

The whisper I heard right beside me was an equal mix of relief and agitation.

Whether the frozen, giant face was an exhibit or a prop, I couldn't tell. If it was the latter, I wondered if this room was being used for some kind of haunted house event. Even with such meager light, eyes adjusted to the dark could faintly make out the silhouette of the person standing nearby.

"Don't raise your voice. And as a rule, let's not call each other by our names."

"I-I understand, Lina-san."

".....No, you don't, Wendy."

My shadow of a companion, Wendy, froze for a moment in the darkness at my remark.

"I'm telling you now. If things get dicey because of a blunder on your end, I'm pulling out immediately. Don't forget that if that happens, *you're* the one who'll be in trouble."

"I..... I understand," she murmured as I pinned her down with words.

I had said it as a warning, but in truth, I didn't think things would actually get that dangerous. After all, we were currently sneaking into a classroom building of a military academy on the eve of a festival.

"I know you're there! Even if you hide so still, I know exactly where you are!"

The voice I heard belonged to a woman who sounded like she had a few screws loose. I sensed something slowly entering the room. A small, flickering streak of light cut through the dark—likely a lantern with a shutter used to block the beam.

The opponent had probably noticed our presence back at the stairs. However, she had pretended not to notice to lure us into a false sense of security, then shuttered her lantern and followed us.

"It's useless to hide! I can smell you! You reek of rats! People like you always try to sneak into the classroom wing right before the festival!"

Because of the darkness, I couldn't see her form; only her voice echoed through the air. Rather than a guard, she sounded more like an endless phantom! At any rate, judging by the light just now, I wondered if she was carrying some kind of weapon. Wendy’s words about "death if we're found"... I really hoped she hadn't been serious.

However, based on her tone, the opponent seemed to think we were students. If so, she might try to catch us herself without calling for backup. That gave us a chance to break through. In the darkness, I felt Wendy's hand grip mine tighter, her breathing ragged.

People unaccustomed to battle sometimes freeze up in situations like this... I wondered if she would actually be able to move when the time came.

"Now then. Let me hear it. Why did you sneak in? Were your preparations not finished in time? Or were you planning a little test of courage before the festival?"

The darkness—which I couldn't even distinguish as a shadow—moved, piling up words as if to invite our terror. I had an intuition. She was about to remove the lantern's cover and illuminate us!

"Close your eyes and run when I pull your hand!" I whispered to Wendy. Without waiting for an answer, I squinted and looked away, simultaneously hurling a stone wrapped in my cloak toward the opponent!

Light exploded throughout the room!

"Guh!"

She must have looked directly at it by reflex. The woman let out a groan. Even if the light wasn't actually that powerful, to eyes adjusted to the dark, it was equivalent to a flash of lightning! At the same moment, I yanked Wendy's hand and dashed! We bolted toward the other door of the classroom. It was locked, but it was a simple mechanism that opened from the inside. I threw it open and we jumped out.

As we ran down the dark hallway—

"Giiiiiih! You little brat!"

I turned back at the sound of a resentful scream. Standing by the door we had just exited, illuminated by the light from inside the room, was a silhouette with long, messy black hair, holding a massive scythe like the ones the Grim Reaper holds in picture books.

Wait, that's not standard equipment for a school patrol!

This person was fully intent on reaping souls! When Wendy said death awaited us, I thought she was being paranoid, but it didn't sound like an exaggeration at all now!

Fortunately, because she had looked directly at the light, she couldn't see into the darkness of the hallway yet; she showed a slight hesitation at the exit of the room. But she was only confused because of the surprise. Once it occurred to her to use the lantern, she would be after us in an instant.

On the other hand, we still hadn't found Wendy's forgotten item. As Wendy ran through the dark with me, she let out a very strained, thin whisper.

"...Hi! ...Hee... Mom..."

Despite that, she kept her feet moving. I leaned into her ear.

"What should we do? Retreating is the best move, but—"

When I asked, she fell silent for a moment, then whispered in a tiny voice.

"I have to... find the documents."

Either she had some real backbone, or she was so confused she couldn't make a rational judgment. Either way, if I tried to force her back, she'd probably resist. If we had an internal squabble in this situation, we'd be caught, and I couldn't just abandon Wendy and escape alone. In that case—

"Then this way!"

I had no choice but to push through! Relying on the faint light, I found the stairs. Chanting an incantation under my breath, I cast *Lighting*.

"Light!"

I pulled Wendy's hand and headed up! Once we reached the top, I released the spell toward the bottom of the stairs without even looking back. I had modified the spell to be more intense but with a shorter duration. The light would likely vanish without a trace before I could count to ten.

A dazzling flash erupted behind us.

"Guuuh!"

Another groan from the bottom of the stairs. The opponent chasing us had probably looked straight into the light again.

"...Alright, just as planned! Which room?"

"This way!" Wendy replied to my question. No longer caring about our footsteps, we ran toward the room without hesitation. While chanting, I unlocked the classroom door using the same trick as before. As soon as we entered the pitch-black room, I created a dim light for our own use, closed the door, and locked it from the inside.

"We don't have time! If it's not in this room, we're giving up!"

At my declaration, Wendy finally nodded. Since we couldn't exactly defeat the opponent, staying any longer would be impossible. I wasn't sure what the exhibit was

for, but the room was filled with various folk crafts and stacks of paper that looked like copies of some books. Wendy began searching through them.

"It's not here—!"

A small scream escaped her. A chill ran down my spine. I couldn't hear any footsteps at all.

However, I could clearly sense a presence approaching us in the hallway.

Thud!

The tip of a giant scythe pierced through the classroom door and dug into the room!

"Uwah!" Wendy let out a thin scream.

I wanted to tell her to stay calm, but if I did, the spell I was chanting would go to waste. The scythe blade was pulled back into the hallway.

Wendy started searching another stack of papers. *Hurry up—*

The next strike slammed in! As I continued my chant, my heart let out a groan of impatience.

"You really... made a fool out of me, didn't you...!"

Wendy moved to yet another stack of papers—a voice filled with resentment and madness echoed from the depths of the darkness where the blade had pierced.

Clatter. The door rattled. The scythe tip vanished again.

"—Found it!"

Rattle-clatter! Wendy's voice rang out at that moment! Simultaneously, I dashed over, scooped her up as she grabbed the slip of paper, and ran toward the window!

Crunch! Crack! Thud!

The woman on patrol must have sensed the change in the situation; she began swinging her scythe like a madwoman, attempting to demolish the door.

I leaped to the window, unlatched it, and while still holding Wendy, I kicked off the window frame and dove into the night sky—

"Levitation!"

I activated the spell I had been chanting! We were in the cold night air. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw a lone woman, her face obscured against the light, watching us from the windowsill.

For now, our escape was a success. All that was left was to reach a decent altitude and leave the grounds.

"We did it! Miss Lina!"

At Wendy's excited voice, I nodded with a smile.

"Somehow, yeah. By the way, what kind of document was that anyway?"

"Oh! I made a list of the clothes I intended to wear tomorrow! Without this, I wouldn't know what to wear to the festival!"

The moment I threw her toward the ground with all my strength was after we had left the school grounds.

"Wait, why are you wearing the exact same thing as yesterday!?"

The moment I saw Wendy when she came to pick me up at the inn the next morning—the day of the festival—I reflexively snapped at her. Yes, her outfit was almost identical to yesterday: she was dressed in her mage style, wrapped in a gray robe and cloak.

If I had to point out a difference, it was just that she had a hair ornament and her shoes were slightly different. Despite the vein throbbing in my forehead, she puffed out her cheeks.

"What are you saying, calling it the same as yesterday? Miss Lina! A girl has to be able to tell these differences! First of all, the underwear is completely different. I'm wearing slightly better socks too. The trousers are brand new for today, and the shirt

is a designer piece I prepared for this day. To create a sense of unity, I paid attention to the belt and accessories—"

"But nobody can see them because they're hidden by the robe and cloak."

At my blunt remark, she stopped for a moment.

"—It's true!"

"You just noticed now!?"

Whether she heard my shout or not, Wendy turned a worried gaze toward me.

"Eh? Then, did the scary experience of sneaking into the school yesterday... maybe have no meaning?"

"Hmm. Yeah. No meaning at all. And I'm the one who was dragged along for that meaningless task."

"Are you talking about someone else!?" I found myself screaming.

Complaining all the while, we made our way forward. Signboards announcing the Military Academy's festival were posted here and there along the street, and as we approached, the air turned festive. Eventually, the chatter of the crowds began to mix with the voices of students pretending to be barkers.

"Oh! Good morning, Instructor Wendy!"

"Good morning! Please make sure to visit our stall today!"

Greetings and salutes flew toward Wendy from the surrounding students.

Ah, that's right. I keep forgetting she's an instructor here.

We turned a corner and the view opened up as the festival site came into view. Sturdy stone gateposts stood on either side, and the main gate was thrown wide open. Usually, sentries would stand stiffly at the gate, making it a solemn place, but now it was quite lively.

In place of sentries, there were two students dressed in ill-fitting women's clothing for laughs, calling out to passersby. One of the gateposts used to have a modest nameplate engraved with the school's name, but now it was covered by a massive sign that read: *Berrys Military Academy Festival - General Public Welcome*. The area around the gate was decorated with flowers and ribbons, though the taste left something to be desired. Well, it was a festival; as long as it looked busy, it was fine.

From the open gate, I could see stalls run by students lined up inside the grounds. Even though the official starting time hadn't arrived, the smell of various foods was already wafting out to the street.

As the two of us passed through the gate, the students' greetings held more than just formal politeness. Even though Wendy looked like a bit of a hopeless person to me, she seemed quite popular as an instructor.

Seeing me with her, some guy blurted out, "Who's the kid you brought along?" and I felt a momentary surge of murderous intent. Well, it was a military academy where most people were men. The students were around my age or slightly older, but they were all well-built. When someone like me—slightly smaller than average—was mixed in with them, I suppose it couldn't be helped if I looked a bit younger than my actual age.

"Calling me a 'kid' is a bit much, don't you think?"

I spoke with a smile on my face, but not in my eyes. Wendy, perhaps sensing my bloodlust, hurriedly explained that I was today's guest lecturer. Sensing the respect that entered the students' gazes upon hearing that, I decided to let it slide.

As we were exchanging such pleasantries, someone spoke.

"Good morning, Miss Wilkins."

Miss Wilkins was, of course, Wendy. But more importantly, the dignified voice that rang out caused a tense atmosphere to spread among the students. I turned around and there stood a woman.

The woman looked to be in her early twenties. She was tall and slender, and her long, ink-black hair complemented her loose blue dress perfectly. She was quite a beauty, but I doubted any man visiting the festival today would think of hitting on her.

Why? Because she was gripping a scythe larger than herself.

I barely managed to hide the shock on my face. Her tone and attitude were completely different, but the voice was the same one I had heard last night.

"Ah. Jacqueline. Good morning. I'm glad the weather turned out so nice."

Wendy greeted the woman, Jacqueline, with a carefree, beaming smile.

"Indeed. —By the way," Jacqueline said, casting a sharp gaze at me. "Is this perhaps today's guest lecturer?"

I managed to force a smile, gave a small nod, and introduced myself.

"I'm Lina Inverse. It's a pleasure to meet you today."

"I've heard rumors of you. I am Jacqueline Trans, in charge of instruction and security here. Someone of your caliber can surely modify magic and do all sorts of things, I imagine."

She let out a small, meaningful smile.

"I am looking forward to today's lecture."

"Oh, no. I just hope my humble talk will be of some use."

We handled the social pleasantries smoothly, yet a tense atmosphere drifted between us.

"Well then, I have patrols to do. Until later."

With that, she turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowd. I waited until she was out of sight.

"...I've been completely marked, haven't I..." I muttered in a voice only Wendy could hear.

She looked at me with a blank expression.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

So you really didn't notice!

I pulled her shoulder close and whispered a retort in her ear so the surrounding students wouldn't hear. Wendy, who didn't seem like much of an actress, had spoken so normally that I thought she was just playing it cool, but...

The town I had happened to stop in wasn't particularly remarkable, other than being reasonably large. As a greeting of sorts, I had visited the Sorcerers' Guild, and it was there that I was asked to give a special lecture at the military academy's festival.

A military academy was, as the name implied, a school for soldiers. Beyond combat training, it was a place that taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and various strategies and tactics. Because magic was often used in battle, the school frequently invited mages from the Guild as lecturers, and the bond between the school and the Guild was strong.

That was why a request for a lecture had flown my way—a traveling mage with actual combat experience and a certain level of fame (for better or worse).

".....Ah."

The person assigned as my guide was a woman on secondment from the Sorcerers' Guild who taught classes at the school. She looked to be not quite twenty years old. She had straight, shoulder-length red hair and usually wore the standard mage style of a grey robe and cloak.

She had visited me at my inn just a short while ago. Apparently, she had forgotten something inside the school building and wanted me to come with her to retrieve it.

Between the town's history, customs, and the local lord's intentions, this military academy had a strict rule: unless under orders, no one was allowed in or out after curfew.

While they held a festival open to the public at this time of year, it was still a military facility. Without the forgotten documents, she claimed it would interfere with tomorrow's festival. She said she had asked various people to go with her, but everyone had refused. She went as far as to say that if I refused her too, she might as well die.

Faced with that, I couldn't exactly say no.

"Do you have an idea which room you left them in?"

At my whispered question, Wendy replied in an uncertain voice.

".....There are rooms we stopped by when I was showing you around today, right? I think I left them in one of those....."

To be honest, I had done a quick tour of the campus with Wendy earlier that day. At the time, the students had been out in force, busily preparing for tomorrow.

Haunted houses, live cooking demonstrations of wild flora and fauna, "Sergeant Cafes," secondhand equipment bazaars, and so on.

I had wondered what that lively school building would feel like once it was night and deserted. The curiosity to see it had certainly played a part in my decision.

There were stairs near both ends of the building; Wendy headed for one of them. The stairs were also made of stone. Unlike wooden stairs, they didn't creak, but they would make loud footsteps if one walked carelessly.

We crept up with hushed steps. I didn't remember seeing Wendy put down anything like documents, but...

"Lina-san, some light—"

Anyway, that was the sequence of events that led Wendy and me to leap over the high wall surrounding the grounds using "Levitation" and infiltrate the classroom building.

Up to this point, everything had gone smoothly. Perhaps because it was within a walled compound, or perhaps because nothing of extreme value was kept there, the security for the classroom building itself was practically nonexistent.

The poorly fitted double-hung windows had latches that were almost insulting to call "locks." I simply slid a thin blade between the windows and flicked it up to open them easily. It took longer to open the window quietly without making it creak than it did to undo the lock.

However, the problem was whether we could actually find the forgotten documents.

The classroom building was three stories tall. There were far too many rooms for the number of students, but according to Wendy, the building was sometimes used for indoor combat training.

In any case, out of all those many rooms—

"Okay, let's check them one by one. You know the layout, so you lead the way. I'll light the path from behind. There might be patrols inside the building, so stay sharp."

"Yes. Then let's start with the second-floor classrooms."

In the faint light, I saw Wendy's silhouette nod. And so, the two of us began to advance through the pitch-black building.

Our own footsteps felt like they were echoing loudly. Every now and then, in the spot where I directed the small light ahead of Wendy’s path, a face would suddenly appear—decorations for the festival. Even though I knew what they were, they still gave me a momentary jolt.

The students were supposed to hold various events in this building, and each room had different decorations and signs posted.

It happened just as we reached a stairwell landing.

"Hold it."

At my whisper, I wrapped the stone in my cloak to douse the light. There was no need for Wendy to ask why.

On the stairs, further up from the second floor, a dim light was swaying.

".....This is bad, Lina-san. It's a patrol. If we're found, we'll be caught and subjected to intense torture before being killed!"

"W-Wait! .....Stay calm. It's just a patrol. As long as we aren't found, it's fine. —This way."

I grabbed her hand as she began to panic in the dark and led her back down.

After observing for a moment from below, it seemed the light was heading down toward the first floor. Wendy and I hurried toward the opposite side of the hallway—as fast as we could without making a sound.

Almost as soon as the lantern light appeared at the bottom of the previous stairs, we reached the other staircase. During that time, there was no change in the movement of the lantern. It seemed we had managed to avoid being spotted.

Keeping our footsteps silent, we went up the stairs to the second-floor corridor. There, we finally stopped.

".....We should have bypassed them with that."

I whispered softly and loosened the cloak to create a thin beam of light. Since the light had gone straight from the third floor to the first, it meant the patrol for the second and third floors was likely finished. That meant they wouldn't be coming back to the second floor for a while. We could search thoroughly until the next patrol.

Perhaps due to the tension and the darkness, the ordinary silence now felt painful to the ears.

"Then, as planned, we'll check the rooms on the second floor."

The two of us moved through the corridor in silence, relying on the faint light. Before long:

"It's here."

Wendy stopped in front of a door with a sign that read "History Research."

It seemed they were doing a serious and educational—yet plain—exhibit on the history of countries, territories, and cities. When we had stopped by this room during the day, it had been overflowing with documents, likely for the display. Wendy had spent some time there talking to someone who seemed to be a fellow lecturer. The chances were high that she had forgotten them there.

She reached for the door, but it only rattled slightly.

".....Oh.....?"

It was locked, of course. It seemed she hadn't even considered that. I approached the door before she could panic again and cause a scene.

"If it's locked, leave it to me."

I took out a wire I had hidden in my bandana, poked it into the keyhole, and gave it a little wiggle.

".....Why do you have a wire in a place like that.....?"

"I'm at that age... and... there!"

While giving a vague answer to Wendy's blunt question, I manipulated the wire with my fingertips. Soon enough, there was a small *click*.

Since it was this kind of place, the lock was extremely simple. When I swung the door open, Wendy let out a sigh of admiration.

"To open it so easily..... you're amazing, Lina-san..... I'm actually a little put off."

"You're put off?! Whatever. Just hurry up and look."

I entered the room, closed the door, and after locking it from the inside, I further loosened the cloak around the glowing stone.

A white light illuminated the surroundings. It was plenty for eyes used to the dark. I had narrowed the beam so the light hit the ceiling directly to prevent it from leaking through the gaps in the windows or doors.

Normally there would be desks and chairs, but they had been removed and replaced with display boards that doubled as partitions to create a visitor route. The two doors at the front and back of the classroom served as the entrance and exit. Display papers were pasted here and there, and stacks of leaflets were piled on the tables.

It was mostly tidy, making it hard to imagine Wendy's missing items were lost in a pile of papers, but.....

Sure enough, after searching the area for a while, she whispered with a sigh of disappointment.

".....It's not here."

"Then, the third floor?"

"I suppose so..... I'm sorry for the trouble, but if you would."

I went to the door, dimmed the light, unlocked it, and opened the door—

In that instant, a chill ran down my spine!

I instinctively grabbed Wendy's hand and jumped backward, while simultaneously covering the stone completely with my cloak!

Just before the light vanished and we were swallowed by darkness, I saw it clearly! Along with a sharp whistling sound, a silver streak of light flashed right before my eyes!

"—Li—"

"Shh! Don't say my name!"

I cut off Wendy just as she was about to scream and we held our breath in the back of the classroom.

Did the time that followed last a split second, or an eternity?

"Heh."

Something laughed in the depths of the darkness.

"Heh. Hehehe. Giggles... Tee-hee-hee-hee!"

"You haven't realized... realized what?"

"I'm telling you! That Jacqueline person is the same one who chased us all around the classroom building yesterday!"

".....Wha-!?"

I quickly covered Wendy’s mouth before she could let out a shout of surprise.

"Keep your voice down! It’s a secret that we sneaked in here yesterday, right!?"

I waited for her to give a small nod, and once I released my hand, she whispered, ".....B-but, her way of speaking and everything is totally different from the guard who chased us yesterday..."

"Then let me ask you this. Are there usually multiple women carrying giant scythes around here?"

When I asked, she froze as it clicked. "You’re right! There isn't anyone else!"

Well, I figured as much. In the first place, a giant scythe—setting aside its scary appearance—is a pretty unwieldy thing to use as a weapon. There was no way there would be more than one.

"Exactly. And in a military academy where the female population is low to begin with, there aren't going to be several women wandering around with something like that. Most likely, she realized it was us who broke in yesterday, too."

"No way..... could she!?"

'No way' nothing. Based on what she had said, it was plain as day. I had fired off plenty of arranged lighting spells and escaped through the air using a levitation incantation. The opponent would have to be an idiot not to realize they were dealing with a mage.

Furthermore, though I didn't know if her vision was clear or blurry, she might have seen our retreating backs. Since we had just been there to retrieve a forgotten item, she hadn't interrogated us specifically, but...

"Well. I just hope this ends without any trouble."

Harboring a premonition of chaos in my chest, I took a step forward into the festival.

[Next Time Preview]

Finally, the day of the festival arrives! However, Lina has been completely marked by Jacqueline from the Internal Security Patrol! Will the festival really end without incident? And if it really does end without incident, will the readers get angry after all!?!?

What are you talking about, Mr. Editor! It's not like I haven't thought about the future plot at all! Putting such trivial matters aside, next time: "Academy Festival" Part 2! Wait while I compile a report on why stall food tastes so delicious!

Academy Festival [Part 2]

I headed toward the school building, eating my way through the food stalls lined up on both sides—barbecue, juice, soup, yakitori, crepes, popcorn. It was a parade of students' stalls. While one could guess the quality of the taste, the atmosphere of a festival is the ultimate spice.

".....Are you still eating, Lina-san?" Wendy, who was walking beside me, spoke in an exasperated tone; I replied in an equally exasperated one.

"You've got to eat these things when you can. While you're saying 'later,' it’s common for the shops with the good flavors to sell out."

"That certainly happens often, but... I brought you here today to give a special lecture, so..."

Wendy was probably worried that I would let loose at the festival and cause some kind of failure.

"I'll do the lecture properly. On top of that, I'll enjoy the festival. Otherwise, it's a loss, right?"

"I suppose that's true, but..."

Even as she said it, Wendy still wore a slightly worried expression. But at that moment, an abnormality occurred suddenly!

In one corner of the clamor filling the area, there was a commotion. Looking over, I saw students and general visitors fleeing toward us! Mixed with the screams, I heard someone's warning shout!

"Watch out! A Berserk Sergeant has escaped from the Sergeant Cafe!"

"Hah!?"

Screams erupted! Involuntarily, I raised my voice and looked at Wendy for an explanation; she nodded and said, "—It seems that's the situation!"

"What do you mean 'that's the situation'!? Why is a soldier going on a rampage!?"

"What are you saying, Lina-san! After all, it's a Sergeant! A *Sergeant*! If there's an event like a festival, it's only natural for them to run wild!"

"No, you're wrong! Your assumptions are totally wrong!"

"Even if you say that, he's actually rampaging!"

She was certainly right. No matter how much I denied it with words, the people running away weren't going to vanish. No, rather, mixed with the screams, the "cry" of the Sergeant "*—GUUUUUUUN-SOOOOOOOOO—*"was clearly getting closer.

Wendy took a combat stance and fixed her eyes in that direction. "That's enough talk, Lina-san! He's coming!"

"Why is the mood set like I'm the one who has to defeat him!?"

The very moment I threw out that retort, the wave of people fleeing around us stopped. Feeling a premonition, I looked over and saw a single figure standing there! It was approaching us!

The weapon in his hand was not a sword but a piece of timber. He was clad in well-worn armor. On the shoulder of the armor was likely his rank insignia. Five white stars on a red background. This—was the Sergeant.

"The rank insignia has turned into an aggressive color..." Wendy gulped slightly.

No, that's probably just the original color of the thing.

I wanted to throw in another retort, but I was already entering the incantation for a spell! In the corner of my vision, I caught sight of Jacqueline peering at us from behind the shade of a garden tree.

There were festival participants all around. If I fired off a clumsy spell and missed, I would end up involving them—but a certain thought crossed my mind. It was simply a matter of not using a clumsy spell!

Just as our eyes met—or perhaps they didn't—Jacqueline stepped out from the shade, pushed through the crowd, and finally realized the atmosphere of the surroundings. Coming toward us, she gave me a military salute.

"I thank you for your cooperation in the suppression. Normally, stopping a Sergeant's rampage would be my duty, but..."

I nodded at her words, as the explanation from Jacqueline's side proved to be the "correct" one.

"Burst Flare!"

BOOM! Simultaneously with my "Words of Power," the dirt and sand at the opponent's feet erupted, blowing the Sergeant away with a direct hit!

A roar of "Ohhh!" rose from the people around us. The blown-away Sergeant hit the ground with a thud and lost consciousness. Naturally, there was no damage to the surroundings. Since he was wearing armor, he wouldn't die from that.

I pinched the edge of my cloak and gave a bow, declaring the end of the incident. "Okay, all finished."

Whoaaaaaaa. Clap clap clap clap. Applause and voices of admiration broke out around me.

"No, but what was the cause of the rampage?"

When I asked, she gave a small nod with a serious face. "That is... because that is simply what a 'Sergeant' is."

"As if that's a reason!"

In contrast to me, who had raised my voice instinctively, Jacqueline spoke flatly.

"The Master Sergeants or Sergeants First Class—the ranks right above and below—are perfectly fine, but regarding this specific rank, it is always one of two things: causing a problem or performing a great feat. Since ancient times, the position known as 'Sergeant' has been that way. As for why this phenomenon occurs, human wisdom has yet to reach the point of solving the mystery."

"Are you really blaming it on divine providence'!?"

I tried to retort further—but my words froze. Wendy and the others around us, who seemed to be students of the military academy, all had expressions just like Jacqueline’s.

.....Uhh..... since everyone else is convinced..... I guess that's just how it is here.....

".....Well..... investigating the cause is your job, anyway....."

Of course, I wasn't convinced, but I had no choice but to be vague.

Jacqueline nodded, and while keeping the giant scythe in her right hand, she used her free left hand to grab the unconscious Sergeant by the back of his collar.

"At any rate, I apologize for the trouble caused to our guest. I will handle the aftermath, so please, enjoy the festival."

Saying this, she turned on her heel and walked away, dragging the Sergeant along. The small smile she flashed as she left appeared deeply meaningful to me, and I couldn't help but wonder about it.

Entering the classroom building, the bustle of the festival increased even more. Various classrooms were holding exhibits, and the hallways were filled with students calling out and people passing through. Pushing through that crowd, Wendy and I headed for the guest waiting room on the third floor.

"But why is the waiting room on the third floor of the classroom building? I feel like it would have been better to put it in a separate building!"

I asked in a loud voice to avoid being drowned out by the noise around us; Wendy also replied loudly.

"We couldn't exactly use the armory or the stables, and the faculty building has military documents and such, so there are various inconveniences. So, it was decided to use a room at the end of the third floor, where the foot traffic is relatively light."

"I see."

Reaching the stairs and heading up together, I spoke. "By the way, Wendy. I want to ask, is Jacqueline-san someone who is strict about rules?"

"Well, she's the person entrusted with the internal security here. It's to the extent that she would exert her full power to grant 'death' to anyone who violates the discipline. Though, that's mostly toward the students."

".....I knew it....." I let the murmur escape so that even Wendy couldn't hear it.

"Oh? Is there something bothering you, Lina-san?"

"Nah, I was just wondering what kind of person she is," I glossed over it casually.

To tell the truth, a certain idea had occurred to me. But at least at this stage, it was nothing more than a mere imagination.

When we reached the third floor, the number of people decreased. Though, that was strictly speaking in comparison to the floors below. There were many students who seemed to be focused on us, either because Wendy was their target or because I, the guest, was a rarity.

At the very end of the third floor, there was a room with a plate saying "Authorized Personnel Only." Wendy put her hand on the door, stopped, and prompted me forward. "It's here. Please, go in."

I moved forward as told, and Wendy opened the door.

At that moment. What should I call the sensation I felt? Driven by a feeling I could only describe as a sense of wrongness or a premonition, I instinctively—

I had jumped backward just in time! Simultaneously, Wendy threw the door open with a heavy *thud* that echoed from the floor right in front of us. It was exactly where I had been about to step. A small, square object was rolling there.

It was a blackboard eraser! I had seen them at places like the Mage’s Guild; they were tools for wiping chalk off boards, usually made of cloth stuffed with cotton and set in a wooden frame. However, while the cloth on this one looked normal, the frame possessed the dull glint of iron.

I immediately scanned the hallway. Beyond the flowing crowd, I caught a definite glimpse of Jacqueline’s trademark giant scythe. Unaware of any of this, Wendy spoke in a carefree voice.

"Oh my. A blackboard eraser on the door? What a classic prank."

"Don't just brush it off as a 'classic prank'! Also, this eraser is made of iron!"

When I pointed this out, Wendy nodded solemnly.

"Yes. They are sturdy, serve as daily strength training, and are excellent items that come in handy during emergencies."

"What kind of 'emergency' involves this?! Besides, if a heavy object like this scored a direct hit, it would crack my skull open!"

Naturally, it hadn't just been wedged into a slightly ajar door. If that were the case, the trick would have been visible from the outside. Instead, wooden scraps had been used as supports to hide the mechanism from the exterior. Furthermore, because of the iron frame, the sound of it hitting the floor hadn't been a *poof*, but a *thud*. I could practically feel the murderous intent oozing from whoever set this up. And that scythe I just saw in the crowd... what had been mere suspicion was starting to feel very real.

However, Wendy lacked any sense of danger. "Now, now, Lina-san. It’s a festival, so some students are bound to cut loose a little. For now, let’s take a break here."

...I wasn't convinced, of course, but I didn't think I could talk sense into her. I followed her into the room as prompted. I searched the area to see if any other traps had been set, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Just as I sat down in a chair, thinking I might have been overthinking things—

"Watch out! A rampaging chimera has escaped from the haunted house! It's heading toward the third-floor waiting room!"

Screams and student voices echoed from the hallway.

"Give me a break..." I muttered wearily. I began chanting a spell under my breath and reluctantly headed out into the corridor.

Between rampaging chimeras, wild horses, berserk stone golems, and even a rampaging "Local Specialty" display, Wendy and I certainly didn't stay still in the waiting room. After I finished off the chimera with a single offensive spell, I tried walking around under various pretexts, but incidents broke out everywhere we went.

...Of course, I handled every single one with offensive spells, but it was quite a hassle trying not to involve the surrounding people. The trouble surged toward us like a Raging Billow. Starting with a rampaging sergeant and moving on to others, every single incident seemed to head exactly where Wendy and I were.

And then, after each incident settled down, Jacqueline would invariably stroll onto the scene.

"There's no doubt about it now," I whispered with conviction. It was shortly before noon. We were walking together after I had neutralized a rampaging "Local Specialty"—which, according to the materials, had been an ice-based attack spell—in the schoolyard.

"But... why would we be targeted? By whom?"

I moved closer to her and lowered my voice even further.

"I mean, it's a bit unnatural for so many things to go out of control like this..."

A bit? It wasn't just "a bit." It was blatantly obvious.

"But... what if that were the case?"

Wendy caught her breath slightly. "That's..."

To Wendy, who was asking in her usual easygoing tone, I whispered my suspicion—no, what had already become a certainty—into her ear so no one else could hear.

"There's no mistaking it. We're being targeted."

"No way! That can't be!" Wendy let out a small shriek.

"Strange things have been happening one after another. Do you really think this is all just a coincidence?"

That was the problem. Last night, when we sneaked into the school building, she caught us and we ran away. From her perspective, failing to catch rule-breakers must have been a huge humiliation.

And then this morning. She became convinced that we were the intruders from last night. She didn't have proof to corner us, but she couldn't let it go. So, she decided to punish us by any means necessary.

When I questioned her, her eyes wavered. "...Now that you mention it... I do feel like a bit too much is happening this year compared to the usual festival..."

Well, obviously. If incidents happened at this pace every year, it would have become a major issue long ago and the festival would have been canceled.

"Of course, this is just my imagination since I don't have proof."

I also had other concerns, but for now, I gave her a quick, brief explanation. I thought she might deny it, but Wendy furrowed her brow.

"Now that you mention it... that makes sense."

"Maybe we should just go and confront Jacqueline-san directly...?"

I shook my head at Wendy’s timid suggestion. "If we confront her without proof, she'll just talk her way out of it, and we'll end up looking like the bad guys. We have no choice but to steadily gather material that could serve as evidence."

"But... while we're taking our time with that..."

"Watch out! Rampaging ingredients have escaped from the cafeteria!"

"Here we go again!"

I nodded at her response and glanced toward Jacqueline. A wild ox was charging through the fleeing crowd! The spear of cold I unleashed didn't miss, turning the ox into a block of ice!

Before I even waited for an answer, I gave Wendy instructions and began chanting a spell.

Do they use live oxen as ingredients in this cafeteria?! I kept that retort to myself. Of course, I made sure no bystanders were harmed! Except for Wendy!

I scanned the surroundings and saw Jacqueline a short distance away. She was looking this way with a somewhat exasperated expression.

"Wendy! Don't move carelessly!"

"Y-Yes!"

"Menu-."

Just as planned!!

If she's in charge of security, it’s only natural for her to go where an incident occurs. But the ox's charge was incredibly fast! My spell probably wouldn't be finished in time! Without hesitation, I whipped off my cloak and spread it out toward the opponent!

The moment it closed in!

I let go of the cloak and leaped far to the side. The ox charged headlong into the cloak, and with that momentum, it slammed into Wendy, who was standing right behind it!

"Nomoh-fwee?!"

Wendy let out a strange scream as she was sent flying spectacularly! Blinded and having hit something, the ox slowed its pace. I didn't miss the opening and blasted it with my completed spell!

When she called my name, I looked over to see Wendy staggering to her feet. Oh. She’s recovered already. She’s tougher than I thought.

"By any chance... did you just abandon me...?"

As she pressed me with a resentful gaze, I waved my hands dismissively.

"Nah, not at all. The opponent's charging speed was just faster than I expected. Besides, if you're going to resent someone, blame the ox—the cause of the rampage—not me, right?"

"Well... I guess that's true..."

"With that, Jacqueline-san, I’ll leave the cleanup to you."

Wendy had been sent flying while letting out a weird scream. That was the fourth time today. Along with Wendy, I quickly hurried away from the spot.

Even after the two of us ate lunch, various incidents continued. A rampaging capybara, a rampaging sweet potato dumpling, and a rampaging chef. Various things went wild almost incessantly, and every time, Wendy got sent flying while I stopped the rampage with a spell. Jacqueline’s expression was becoming increasingly complex, yet the harassment continued. However! I sensed we were almost at the finish line. If Wendy just keeps getting sent flying like this—

"Lina-san—"

"Whoa!"

I accidentally let out a yelp and pulled back when Wendy suddenly whispered in my ear. Because she had been sent flying so many times, her hair was a mess and her clothes were frayed in several places; she looked quite pathetic. Directing a resentful voice and gaze at me, she spoke.

"Could you please cut it out already?!"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been... intentionally abandoning me for a while now, haven't you...?"

My heart ached, but this was a strategy! All for the sake of my personal safety! I put on a bright, cloudless smile.

"There's no way. The opponent's tactics are just slightly exceeding my ability to respond. But it’s okay. I’m safe."

"Just *you*?! What about me?!"

When she protested with teary eyes, I finally lowered my voice. "Even if you say that... nothing would have happened if you hadn't forgotten that thing yesterday in the first place."

"Ugh..." Wendy groaned quietly. Then, she turned a sharp gaze toward Jacqueline, who had once again arrived for "post-incident processing."

"Jacqueline-sensei!"

At the sudden call, Jacqueline widened her eyes for an instant, but her expression quickly went blank.

"What is it?"

There wasn't a hint of agitation in her voice.

"If you're going to claim you don't understand, fine!"

Keeping the intensity in her eyes, Wendy pointed a finger at Jacqueline.

"In that case, I want you to have a match! With Lina-san!"

"Me?!"

"...Ho."

Jacqueline's eyes narrowed.

"I'd like to ask why... but I *am* personally interested in seeing how a mage like Lina Inverse, who has survived many battles, actually fights. If you like, could we have a sparring match as an exhibition? Regardless of who wins or loses, we shall hold no grudges afterward."

"...I see." I muttered at the proposal. Jacqueline was subtly suggesting that if we settled things through a fight, she would stop meddling.

"It might be a bit much for crying children or people with weak hearts, so how about we limit the spectators to just the military academy students and hold it in a wide-open area?"

"Understood. I will arrange it as a demonstration lesson for the students."

Jacqueline nodded deeply.

And so, Jacqueline and I finally came to a direct confrontation!

A dry wind blew across the earth. The military academy students surrounded the fairly large courtyard, and people were peeking out from the windows of the classroom wing as well. In one corner of the crowd, I saw Wendy watching us.

"We will now conduct an exhibition match between special instructor Lina Inverse and Jacqueline Trans!"

Jacqueline declared in a sonorous voice amidst the wind.

Of course, there was a possibility she was hiding small blades. But the only weapon she held was, as always, that massive scythe.

"Take a good look at how a mage with actual combat experience fights!"

With that, she looked at me and said, "Start!"

At the signal, she made a mad dash toward me! She intended to close the distance immediately to prevent me from having time to cast a spell!

"Ah-hahahahaha!"

The out-of-place laughter echoing out came from Wendy, who was outside the spell's effective range. She was laughing from the bottom of her heart, even with tears in her eyes.

"One from me, too!"

I raised my right hand and called out to everyone around us.

"Since this is a mock battle for reference, I'm going to fight in a way that's close to a real battle. However, I want you to realize that while a swung sword can be stopped inches away, you can't stop an unleashed attack spell mid-air. Everyone, please watch out for stray bullets."

The students buzzed for a moment at the mention of "stray bullets." Ignoring them, I looked at Jacqueline.

"Then, please give the signal to start."

I took a few steps back to set the distance.

"Then, the match begins now! Start!"

I had expected her to come at me like that! I also leaped backward at the start to maintain distance. Of course, she was overwhelmingly faster running forward, but my spell was completed before she could catch me!

I unleashed it instantly without hesitation!

"Dill Brand!"

BA-BOOM!

What I unleashed was a merciless, wide-area indiscriminate attack spell! It blew away everything in its path! Jacqueline and the spectators were sent flying! Even their screams were drowned out by the howling gale!

The match was decided in that single instant. Afterward, people lay groaning. Well, ultimately it's a spell that creates wind. If they listened to my warning and took a proper fall, they shouldn't have taken any serious damage.

When I looked over, Wendy was running toward us.

"We lose! We lose! Jacqueline-san, it's our complete defeat!"

At the call, Jacqueline groggily pushed herself up halfway and looked at me.

"...When... did you notice...?"

"It’s pretty obvious," I said. "The constant rampages. Someone showing up as if to say 'look at how suspicious I am.'"

Simply put, I had thought it was Jacqueline's harassment toward us. I believed that until halfway through.

"But while one person can cause a rampage, it’s hard for one person to guide the rampaging object to an exact location. That’s what kept bothering me. I figured there had to be a fair number of accomplices guiding the rampaging things to the target area."

It was a natural conclusion, but the mastermind of the incident shouldn't have had the time for such behind-the-scenes maneuvering and preparation. Yet, the incident actually happened. If that's the case, I could only think of it one way: almost everyone at the school was in on it, and this had been planned from a long time ago.

The goal was likely to force the guests into doing a serious exhibition match. Of course, in that case—

"That would mean you're naturally a part of this too," I said, glancing at Wendy.

Her response was a smile. So, that was how it was. Everything had been set up from the moment Wendy "forgot" her documents inside the school. Jacqueline had tested my abilities there, and then, on the day of the festival, she caused various things to go out of control right in front of the students to provoke me. This was likely intended to make it look like it was all Jacqueline's doing while simultaneously showing the students the guests' reactions and true power.

In fact, there hadn't been a single instance of harassment in places where the students couldn't see. And those students were probably tasked with guiding the rampaging objects toward me.

Originally, the script was likely for the frustrated guest to pick a fight with Jacqueline, leading to a mock battle.

"In the end, Miss Lina saw through our plan halfway through," Wendy said. "Intentionally involving only me in the rampaging objects from the midpoint was your way of expressing that you noticed, wasn't it?"

I nodded at Wendy's point. ...Well, truth be told, I only realized it when I heard the proposal for the exhibition match. I couldn't exactly say, "Actually, I just thought about using Wendy as a sacrifice," so I tried to act as if I had noticed much earlier.

"It was when I couldn't stand it anymore and proposed the duel, right?"

I was inwardly impressed by Wendy's observation. It was exactly as she said. But to perceive that much—perhaps Wendy was actually quite capable. I gave a small shrug.

"Well, it's a pain when someone closes the distance and attacks with a concealed blade. I figured I'd finish it quickly."

It was Jacqueline who let out a cry of surprise at my explanation.

"Why... did you think... it was a concealed blade...?"

I shot a quick glance at the large scythe she used to support herself and spoke my thoughts.

"I mean, even though you call it a 'mock exhibition match,' you're carrying something that doesn't look suited for actual combat. I'd at least consider the possibility of it being a concealed weapon."

"I see..."

This time, I was the one with a wry smile. I knew I'd hit the nail on the head.

"I believe the students have now understood Miss Lina's true strength as well," Wendy strengthened her voice and declared to the surrounding students. "Now then! Even though the schedule, start time, and location differ, we will now begin the special lecture by our guest, Miss Lina Inverse! Is everyone ready!?"

Certainly, if this had been a request, I would have worried that involving students might lead to a pay cut. Jacqueline was at a considerable disadvantage the moment she accepted that proposal. It seemed they had made various other small preparations, but...

A thunderous round of applause broke out. In that situation, I couldn't exactly say no. At any rate, she had created a situation advantageous to herself even before the signal to start and had inevitably secured her victory.

The one thing I didn't get was why they went to such roundabout lengths. They could have just requested an exhibition match and a lecture normally. Wendy gave a wry smile and explained.

"Many of the students believe that power is everything. Just a lecture would have gone in one ear and out the other. That's why we first needed to show the guest's true ability. If we frame it as a formal request, there are many cases where the guest won't show their true power. Even you, Miss Lina—if this were a request, you wouldn't have blown away the surrounding students along with your opponent, right? That wouldn't have been much of a lesson."

I let out a small clearing of my throat and began the lecture as prompted.

The lecture was—to put it mildly—a massive hit. The moment it ended, a storm of applause followed. Questions came flying in from students and faculty alike, and by the time I finally caught my breath, the festival was drawing to a close.

The end of a festival is always somewhat melancholy. The color of the sunset staining the sky turned to indigo, marking the end of the day.

"Well then, Miss Lina." With a cheerful smile, Jacqueline wrapped an arm around my neck and held me in a firm lock. "We'll have you tell us all sorts of stories over dinner."

"I'd like to hear about the unusual sights and customs of various regions," Wendy added.

Besides them, about ten instructors from the military academy, both men and women, gathered around me. ...I was liked... or rather, liked a bit *too* much...

Under the guise of a social gathering, I was taken to a tavern and eatery and made to talk incessantly. I was finally released at dawn the next day.

...In the end, it wasn't until after I had left the town that I realized the talking at the exhibition match and the social gathering was all unpaid work!

(Academy Festival: Finished)

Protect! Our Traditional Culture!

"I can tell, you're a waitress, aren't you!Well, whatever you are, you've got a bit of a waitress smell about you! You might not be one now, but you used to be, or you have a relative who is!"

"What kind of smell is that!?"

"Regardless of the logic, I just know! You're a waitress!"

I frowned at the nonsensical shouting and came to a halt. It was a small mountain road. There was no one else around. However, I had sensed a presence lurking in the bushes ahead for a while now. I had prepared myself for the likelihood of bandits, but to be honest, I never expected to be called a waitress out of the blue.

The moment I stopped, the bushes rustled, and a man emerged. Red hair, a jagged tattoo on his left cheek, a leather jacket, and a large knife at his belt. He felt more like a city thug than a mountain bandit or highwayman, but either way, why the waitress label?

For the record, my style—Lina Inverse's style—consisted of a black cloak, a black bandana, and jewel amulets at key points. I looked like a sorceress from any angle.

"...How exactly do I look like a waitress to you?"

"It's the scent!" The man raised the tone of his voice.

I listened in silence, a cold sweat breaking out. My big sister back home worked as a waitress part-time. Furthermore, I had even been taught the basics of waitressing by her, half as a game! Had this man sensed that!? What a completely useless ability.

"Was I right?"

Seeing my reaction, the man looked smug. "Sorry, but I can't let anyone with waitress experience pass through here!"

"Why!?"

"No more talk! Just stay quiet—!"

The man reached for the knife at his waist.

"Bomb Di Wind!"

BOOM!

A gale of offensive magic screamed, blowing the man away instantly without even allowing him a moment to blink!

It wasn't a spell I had cast. The voice that wove the "Words of Power" to release the incantation belonged to—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! That was a close one, wasn't it, Lina Inverse! But what a coincidence to run into you in a place like this!"

Along with a familiar, idiotic laugh, a single shadow emerged from deep within the bushes onto the road!

Long black hair, a black cloak, shoulder guards with spikes, and a skull necklace around her neck! And clothes with an absurd amount of skin showing! The "don't come near her, don't touch her, or you'll catch something" sorceress, my self-proclaimed rival, Naga the Serpent!

The man who had been blown away was either unconscious deep in the bushes or had fled post-haste; there was no longer any sign of him. It remained a mystery what that was all about, but...

"So, Lina!" Naga puffed out her chest arrogantly and brushed her hair back. "Since I saved you, you're going to help me protect traditional culture!"

".....PROTECT TRADITIONAL CULTURE!?"

Faced with a creature dressed in a way that utterly denied traditional culture spouting such impossible words, my voice cracked.

"...What... what are you talking about...?"

"Hmph. Just follow me."

Naga turned on her heel, her black hair and cloak fluttering. Of course, I knew from experience that nothing good ever came from getting involved with Naga. But I

couldn't defeat my curiosity regarding what on earth had happened to make Naga talk about "protecting traditional culture."

In the end, I started walking after her.

A heavy atmosphere hung over the dining hall in a corner of the village. The people gathered were likely villagers, with many women among them.

"Hmph! You can rest easy! This Naga the Serpent has brought a helper!"

Naga declared confidently the moment we stepped through the entrance, but the reaction was lukewarm. I didn't know what kind of gathering it was, but a mood of defeat was already permeating the room.

Following her lead, I sat at one of the tables. A woman brought over drinks. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, with soft golden hair and violet eyes. She placed the drinks in front of us and gave a polite bow.

"Nice to meet you. I am Felicia, the coordinator for this association."

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

Once the introductions were over, she took a seat and began to speak. "Actually..."

Apparently, this village of Alana had an ancient legend. It was a common story: long ago, a saint had defeated a monster that descended upon this land, and that saint was actually an incarnation of the Water Dragon King. There was a shrine dedicated to that saint on a nearby mountain. The villagers held a modest annual ritual to honor him.

Recently, the local lord changed, and the new lord began various maneuvers to take control of the mountain where the saint was enshrined. It seemed the lord intended to arrange the ritual as a grand event and turn it into a tourist attraction.

He brought forward a proposal to spice up the ritual, but many villagers opposed the plan as it left none of the original form intact. Following the usual pattern for these cases, the lord began a campaign of persuasion and harassment. Some people began to support the plan, and the village was split in two.

However, if the lord exercised his authority, the villagers had no way to resist. So, the villagers devised a plan and appealed to the church for mediation. If the legendary

saint was an incarnation of the Water Dragon King, then this was a legitimate worship of the Water Dragon King. They cooked up the logic that changing the form of the rite was an act of blasphemy against God.

This troubled both the church and the lord. The church naturally didn't want a conflict with the lord, but when God and faith were brought into it, they couldn't just say they didn't care. The lord didn't want to clash with the church either, but he had no intention of backing down.

In the end, the conclusion reached by the church was to have representatives from both the lord and the village perform the ritual to honor the saint, and entrust it to the one who proved more worthy. In plain terms, it was a "ritual battle" to settle the score.

But then, ahead of this ritual battle, the lord started a campaign of sabotage against the opposition! While there had been efforts to win over villagers before, he was now hiring strange groups to carry out blatant harassment. It seemed some people had even been injured due to harassment that went too far.

As I listened to Felicia's explanation, a doubt crossed my mind, and I spoke up.

"By the way... on my way to this village, a weird guy asked me if I was a waitress. I think he was a thug hired by the lord, but... what do waitresses have to do with a ritual?"

At my question, Felicia thought for a moment before answering.

"In the ritual, we first draw water from a spring behind the shrine. From there, along a circular path, there are three 'barrier stones' said to have sealed the monster. We go around in order, pouring a little water on each, and finally pour the last of the water on the saint’s statue at the shrine. The water is carried on something like a tray with a cup on it. Since it must be carried without spilling a drop, I suppose they thought an experienced waitress would be the perfect candidate and tried to eliminate such people."

"I see..."

"However—" she said, casting her eyes down. "In reality, the persuasion efforts toward the people running the village eateries were quite intense."

"If it's just carrying water, we can do it ourselves, but considering everything that's happened, there will likely be sabotage along the way..."

"It is certain that they will interfere. However! I heard that people dispatched from the church will be at the shrine and the stones as judges, but once we are on the mountain path out of sight, it continues for quite a long distance. For us, dodging the interference and finishing the task is simply..."

As Felicia let out a sigh, Naga nodded and turned to me. "That is why, Lina, I will have you handle the water-carrying. I shall be in charge of interfering with the opponent’s contestant."

"Wait a minute, Naga."

I hurriedly put a stop to her, as she was speaking as if the matter was already settled. I could probably manage the water-carrying, but I didn't remember ever agreeing to take this job.

"Hearing the story now, I certainly don't admire the Lord’s methods, but... there are people among the villagers who agree with the 'renewal' plan, right? I'm not sure if it's right for outsiders like us to stick our noses in."

I didn't intend to look lightly upon traditional culture, but staying the same isn't always a good thing. Sometimes, things improve by changing with the times. But why on earth did Naga get involved in this? It didn't seem like the reward was particularly amazing...

However, Naga responded to my opinion with a look of utter triumph.

"Hmph. Lina, I also said the exact same thing as you at first."

"Y-yes."

Felicia took several sheets of dry parchment from her pocket with a rustle. Spreading two of them out, she showed them to me.

"These are... sketches of the Saint’s statue and the barrier stones."

What was drawn there was a simple, rustic statue that looked like a young boy—you couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman—and just plain stones with patterns. It

felt exactly like a local folk religion; it seemed to have tradition, but it lacked any flair.

"The Lord has suggested changing this statue and the stones into these forms..."

Saying that, Felicia spread out another piece of paper and held it out to me.

"Wait... what?"

I was speechless the moment I saw it.

How should I put it? Everyone had become a beautiful girl.

On the paper labeled "Saint Statue," there was a statue of a "bishoujo" with a baby face but a visible chest, wearing clothes that looked like underwear. For some reason, she had cat ears and was wearing a collar in a suggestive pose. On the paper labeled "Barrier Stones," there were statues of three types of beautiful women and girls.

"What the heck is THIS!?" I screamed.

Felicia looked utterly troubled. "The Lord claims that in the original legends, there is no description stating that the Saint was *not* a cat-eared beauty in her underwear. Therefore, he says this is perfectly okay."

"As if that makes any sense! This kind of taste is already more than enough with just Naga around!"

"Hey! How rude, Lina!"

At my shout, Naga knit her brows and pointed with her chin at the projected sketch of the renovated Saint statue.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't lump me in with something that is so completely lacking!"

"Eh. So even by Naga's standards, this is no good?"

To me, it didn't look much different from Naga's current outfit.

"Of course! I mean, if the angle of the underwear was a bit deeper, and with this hairstyle, if they used dog ears instead of cat ears, a choker instead of a collar, and maybe an anklet... then it might have had a bit more 'oomph'."

"It has 'oomph' for you?"

I still didn't get it. Felicia continued in a troubled tone.

"He says because the original statue and stones are still there, it's fine..."

"No. It is absolutely NOT fine."

"Right! I think so too! To begin with, putting animal ears on a Saint statue said to be the incarnation of the Water Dragon King is blasphemy!"

Since the Water Dragon King was originally a dragon—basically the boss of all big lizards—I didn't really care about animal ears, but this was no longer a conversation on that level. If they held a festival like this, the Water Dragon King would be crying tears of blood!

"What on earth was that pervy Lord thinking when he came up with this idea!?"

"Hmph. It is certainly a troublesome idea," Naga said with strange composure as I fumed. "But in a sense, I must admit it was a precise aim."

"Don't you notice anything, Lina?"

"?"

Naga looked around the shop and asked, "How is it?"

Looking around the shop again, I saw everyone still had mournful expressions, and women were particularly prominent. Aside from them... there were only old people and children.

"Okay, I get it!" I yelled.

Naga continued as I stood there exasperated. "And in the Lord's idea, tourists can also participate in the festival. If they pay a special fee, the plan is that they can go around pouring not water, but some kind of lukewarm, slimy liquid on the statues."

"That's BLASPHEMYYYYYY!"

I screamed from the depths of my soul. "That is absolutely not okay, no matter how you look at it! Or rather, this is basically just professional sexual harassment!"

"Wait, don't tell me!?"

As I gasped, realizing the truth, Felicia bit her lip slightly. Among the women around us, some even began to sob.

I see. A bitter feeling welled up in my chest.

"There aren't many men here, are there?"

"Exactly." Naga nodded with a somber face. "Most of the men in this village are in favor of the plan."

"Men are truly hopeless creatures..."

Now, finally, I completely understood. The sadness of the women gathered here. The true face of the Lord's plan. By attaching various excuses, the Lord's "Saint Transformation Plan" was aimed at—namely, turning the ritual into an erotic event to draw in male tourists.

I see. If that was the case, it made sense why Naga would talk about protecting traditional culture.

I kicked back my chair and stood up.

"I won't let them defile the Saint's statue! My feelings are the same as yours! And this Lina Inverse has skills taught to her by her big sister! I'm an expert at handling people who try to trip up waitresses or try to touch their backsides—whether it's crushing their bones or their spirits! If I'm doing this, I will absolutely win!"

At my confident declaration, a light of hope returned to the eyes of everyone gathered.

"So, when we win, as a success fee, you'll take 20% of the pocket money from those traitorous idiot husbands and sons and give it to me and Naga as our reward! Cut the remaining 60%! The other 20% can be pocket money for all of you!"

At my momentum-driven question, the room filled with thunderous applause. But if I lost, such a thing would never happen. Absolutely. I'd bring the hammer down on those idiots! And then everyone would be happy!

Thus, I stood up—less to "protect traditional culture" and more to prevent traditional culture from being turned into an erotic event!

The sky had just the right amount of white clouds. The temperature was pleasantly warm. It was perfect hiking weather, but a tense air drifted in front of the shrine halfway up the mountain.

The "ritual battle" was held four days after I arrived at Alana Village. Yes. During that time, I was taught the etiquette of the ritual, scouted the route, did practice walks, and had meetings with everyone. I did everything that needed to be done.

In front of a very small spring sat a shrine about as tall as a person. Inside was a stone pedestal, and on top was the Saint statue, about the size of a child. The real thing was just as rustic as the sketch. I renewed my resolve. I wouldn't let this turn into a cat-eared girl in her underwear.

Near the shrine, makeshift seats had been set up, where three people in clerical robes—likely from the church—were seated. More than twenty villagers were watching. Felicia’s face was among them.

Incidentally, Naga was on standby in the forest along the course. There was no sign of the person who seemed to be the Lord. He probably left everything to the thugs he hired with money and was relaxing somewhere, never doubting his success.

And the one carrying the water was me, Lina Inverse, now light on my feet after removing my cloak and shoulder guards. On the other hand, the representative for the opposition was the red-haired man with the tattoo on his cheek. He wore his leather jacket and had a large knife hanging from his waist. He was the guy who had ambushed me on the road.

"Oh, it's you..."

The moment he saw my face, the man spat out the words with displeasure. In contrast, I gave him a bright smile.

"Nice to meet you today. I'm Lina."

"Yeah, whatever. I'm Gaines."

Our eyes threw sparks at each other.

"Well then—"

Eventually, the preparations were complete, and a bearded priest stood up and spoke solemnly.

"We shall now begin the deliberation regarding the change in the ritual style of the Alana Saint Statue. The method is as follows: fill a silver cup with water, place it on a ritual tray, receive a blessing from the Saint’s statue, and then visit the three barrier stones on the mountain to pour the water equally. Afterward, return here and pour the remaining water on the Saint’s statue. Now, for this occasion only—"

At a glance from the elderly priest, the remaining two young priests brought forward a ladle and a large jar from behind the seats. Felicia and the others stirred with a commotion.

"Instead of water, you will use this."

"What is that?"

At my question, the priest scooped up the contents with the ladle and tilted it, letting a thin pink liquid pour out.

"It is diluted wine. We cannot have a sacrilege where the precious water used for the ritual is spilled along the way and replaced with ordinary water to cheat. Therefore, to ensure strict fairness, we have prepared this."

I nodded in response.

"I see, a anti-cheating measure. Strict fairness is indeed a good thing. Felicia!"

At my signal, Felicia and two other women carried a barrel over. To the frowning priest, I said with a smile:

"This is diluted mugwort wine that the villagers prepared out of respect for the Saint. It has a light green color, but please mix it with that wine and use it."

The faces of the priests and Gaines turned visibly shaken.

"T-that's...!"

I didn't give the flustered priest a moment to breathe. The priests were planning to cheat in league with the Lord. For the church, doing the Lord a favor wasn't a bad move.

"Surely the church wouldn't dismiss something the villagers prepared out of their faith, or say that only the wine is okay while the mugwort wine isn't, or that it’s inconvenient if the water isn't that specific color? People might doubt your fairness."

"N-no... however..."

"Besides, this perfectly fits the spirit of strict fairness you just mentioned yourself," I continued, pressing the priest who was breaking out in a greasy sweat. "If the two colors are mixed, cheating becomes even more impossible. I'm sure it wouldn't happen, but even if some unscrupulous person planned to prepare a replacement for spilled water, this prevents that too. It’s all pros and no cons. Surely you'll grant this request?"

"....."
c

The elderly priest groaned softly, boxed in on all sides by my logic.

Just as I thought, I muttered inwardly.

Most likely, they had intended to use colored water so that if I spilled mine, I couldn't refill it. Meanwhile, the Lord’s side would have the same liquid hidden along the route so they could refill if they accidentally spilled. I had read that they would probably try such a trick, so I had instructed Felicia and the others to prepare two barrels of diluted mugwort wine and wine so we could produce a different color from the opponent's.

The reason Felicia and the others were surprised when the priest brought out the jar wasn't because it was unexpected, but because it was exactly as I had predicted.

"W-well... but..."

As the priest tried to make an excuse while sweating, Gaines, the Lord’s ally, spoke up dismissively while picking his ear.

"It's fine, isn't it? If we reject the proposal here, they'll just complain that there was cheating if they lose."

He spoke with an air of ease. In other words, he must have been confident in the interference to come.

The priest was bewildered for a moment, but eventually gave in to our proposal. "If you say it is fine..."

The diluted wine and mugwort wine were mixed together, turning into a darkish color. That liquid was then poured into our respective cups. The silver cups were tall and narrow; I couldn't say they looked stable even as a joke. Carrying this on a tray along a mountain path would be tough for someone unaccustomed or clumsy.

The cups were placed on small trays. Gaines and I knelt before the shrine, holding the trays up as if offering a prayer to the Saint’s statue. Then we stood up—

"Then, please begin!"

At the priest's signal, Gaines and I started moving at the same time!

It was a disadvantageous match. This wasn't a race for speed. And the church people stationed at various points would likely make rulings in favor of the Lord. In other words, if it came down to a judgment call, our loss was certain.

The only way to win was for the opponent to spill all their water halfway through, while I finished the task to the end. That was it.

However, I couldn't just trip him and declare victory here. If I did something that blatant, I’d likely be disqualified for it. That meant my turn to act would be when the opponent tried something, or afterward.

I had properly instructed Naga, who was lurking on the path ahead, about that... but I wondered if she’d be okay...

"But you're quite the eccentric one, aren't you?"

Gaines spoke to me while carrying the tray and cup with one hand. Here it comes. The boring attempts to rattle me. I ignored him, keeping the tray on my right palm at shoulder height as I moved. It’s more stable to hold it with both hands, but that creates a blind spot in front. On an unpaved road, if you tripped on a tree root in your blind spot, it would be a disaster.

Gaines continued, unbothered by my silence.

I did not have any particular obligation to the villagers. If I sided with the other party, they promised to give me ten gold pieces. That was their ridiculous sleep-talk. Had they said a hundred gold pieces, my heart might have wavered slightly, but

considering my noble mission to prevent the eroticization of traditional culture, ten gold pieces was not even worth discussing.

"No reaction, huh? Is that old-fashioned tradition really that important to you? Or is it that? Are you jealous because the saint statue in the renewal plan has a bigger chest than you? Gyahahaha!"

Wow... I want to kill this guy...

I suppressed the rising murderous intent and walked for a while along the path between the trees. Suddenly, a bush on the side rustled, and a single shadow leaped out!

"Whoa...!"

"Freeze Arrow!"

Even before the shadow could let out a war cry, the arrow of cold air I released instantly turned the jumping figure into ice! Of course, I had sensed the presence lurking for a while and had been secretly chanting the spell so I could fire it off at any time.

Looking at the frozen opponent, Gaines remarked, "...Isn't this a villager?"

Just as he said, the man frozen mid-shout had the face and appearance of 'Villager A.' Gaines stopped in his tracks and directed a reproachful gaze at me.

"You talk big, but... what if another innocent villager lets their emotions run wild and takes action? This is how you would treat those innocent people—"

"Freeze Arrow!"

"Gugya!"

The next spell I fired pierced the previous thicket, freezing the person who was likely meant to be the next obstructer before they even got a turn. Passing by the frozen bush, I spoke callously.

"In what world do you find an 'innocent spectator' hiding in the depths of a bush and charging at people?"

I didn't even stop my feet; I simply slowed my pace slightly and spoke with resolve.

"I don't know who they are, but there's no doubt they intended to interfere. A second person comes just when you've dodged the first and let out a sigh of relief. It's an effective tactic, but therefore easy to predict. You say they're 'innocent,' but the moment they let their emotions run wild and move to action, they are plenty guilty."

"Tch! Now that you mention it, I certainly feel that way!"

Realizing that the 'Innocent Villager Attack' wouldn't work, Gaines clicked his tongue and spat out the words. I had eliminated the immediate interference, but the festival battle had only just begun. As we started walking again, Gaines wondered what kind of tricks would be used next.

"The priest said it too, didn't he? 'Only death awaits those who disturb the sacred ritual of the festival.'"

"No! He didn't say that!"

"He might as well have if you paraphrase it. I removed a stray troublemaker, so I'd actually like some gratitude."

Imagining various situations in my mind, I walked down the road shoulder-to-shoulder with Gaines.

"Whoa, what the heck is that?"

"Wait!"

A single shadow stood in our way further down the road, a large sword in one hand. Gaines let out a blatantly fake voice. A large man in a horned helmet raised a hoarse voice toward us—or rather, toward me.

"I am the wandering activist, Riguel Branspight! Having heard that some sort of event was taking place here today, I have rushed here to stage a protest for the time being!"

"As if such an activist exists! Burst Flare!"

The cup tilted and left the tray, splashing water. However... *Tch*...

The earth responded to my spell, and a massive surge of dirt and debris erupted from beneath the self-proclaimed wandering activist's feet. The reason I clicked my tongue

internally was that the man in the horned helmet fell without even letting out a scream. Well, he probably wouldn't die. Gaines looked at me.

"Hey... aren't you being a bit too merciless? The guy was just an innocent wandering activist."

"That. Kind. Of. Job. Does. Not. Exist."

I said this as if explaining to a child, slowing my pace only slightly without stopping. Gaines, walking a bit ahead of me, countered.

"What, you don't know? Those jobs exist. You're so uninformed!"

While he was rattling off that nonsense, he lost his footing and his balance was shaken by the ground I had just blasted with the Burst Flare! The ground had become like a freshly plowed field. Stepping into it without knowing was his misfortune! My true aim was this! To crumble the ground under Gaines' feet and make him spill the water!

The cup tilted, and water spilled. But it was only a little. Gaines, who had almost fallen, grabbed the cup with his hand to keep the damage to a minimum.

"Ah. You held the cup with your hand," I pointed out.

"It's a hallucination," Gaines said grumpily, then looked at me and smirked. He boldly placed the cup back on the tray.

"It seems I underestimated you. But now that it's come to this, there's no point in us feigning ignorance anymore. Let's talk honestly. You're quite good, but unfortunately, that's about to end. Waiting for us next is a professional mental-harasser who has no equal when it comes to bothering waitresses and waiters!"

"Is that a trap from your side?"

"He's not someone you can handle with ordinary means."

If we lost the water at the very end, it would all be for naught.

"A professional harasser... doesn't that just mean 'a common thug'?"

A short while after leaving the second stone.

"Now that you mention it, it does feel that way... Kukukukuku."

A man's chuckling echoed through the trees. It was, of course, a new obstructor.

"Well, the fact that you've read all our moves so far means you must be using some kind of trick on your end too, right?"

What are you talking about?

However, I did not immediately fire the attack spell I had prepared for just such an occasion. This was because—a third person, this time a man's voice!

The bushes here and there rustled and shook, and three shadows leaped out. Yet, I continued to play dumb in response to his invitation. There was absolutely no benefit in blabbing about my hand.

"Oh ho. You're going to play dumb even now? Fine. Look forward to what's ahead as much as you like."

A challenge!

Oh, this was interesting. I accepted those words as a clear challenge to me, Lina Inverse!

"Of course. I'll do my best even if you don't tell me. You'd better do your best too."

I smiled back. The festival had finally entered its second half!

At the second boundary stone, the amount of water Gaines poured on the stone was only a tiny bit. Well, that made sense. He had spilled some earlier. If he poured too much here, he might run out of water by the end.

"Professional harassers... don't you usually just call them 'thugs'?"

We walked for a while after leaving the second stone.

"..... Now that you mention it, I suppose so... Hehehehe."

A man’s muffled laughter echoed through the trees. Naturally, it was a new interferer. I didn't release my attack spell immediately, though.

"Hey, hey. You're playing dumb even now? Oh well. Look forward to what's ahead."

Oh, interesting. I'll take those words as a clear challenge to me, Lina Inverse!

"Of course. I'll do my best even if you don't tell me. You do your best too."

I smiled back. The festival was finally entering its second half!

Three figures—two men and one woman—blocked the path. But I still didn't cast a spell. I sensed four presences.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The fourth voice was one I knew all too well! *Is that you, Naga?!*

While I hesitated whether to shout a retort, the bushes behind us rustled, and a figure appeared! Everyone, including me, groaned at the sight.

She wore a mantle wrapped around her face, leaving only her eyes visible, giving her a bizarre, unbalanced look like a mascot head. Below the neck, it was her usual outfit. And as if to threaten us, she held a cleaver in each hand. Honestly, that look was genuinely terrifying, Naga.

"Wh-Who... are you...?"

Naga puffed out her chest and spoke in a muffled voice from under the mantle.

"I am the mysterious murderer who lives in every forest! Since you have passed through this forest without my permission, you have quite the nerve! If you value your life, throw down the tray and cup and leave at once!"

"These guys don't have permission either, do they?" Gaines pointed at me and the three mercenaries.

"..... L-Lina is an acquaintance, so it’s fine!"

Naga stiffened for a second at the pointing.

"You said acquaintance!"

"I-I mean, we're acquaintances, but not *that* kind of acquaintance!"

Her words were becoming completely nonsensical. I began to regret not giving her acting lessons beforehand. Because of her utter incompetence, Gaines and the others regained their cool.

"So you're in cahoots, then?"

"I said we're not!" Naga shrieked. "..... This is bad... To show we aren't together... I'll just have to kill Lina first....."

"Wait a second!!" I screamed.

Of course, Naga's brain had already short-circuited. She came running at me with cleavers in both hands, laughing her usual laugh.

"Whoa! Don't come this way!"

Gaines panicked as I approached him. Of course, the "Forest Serial Killer" followed right behind me. Even if he told me not to come, I fully intended to involve him. Gaines and I dashed straight toward the three people hired by the Lord.

"Whoa!" "She's coming!" "Run, run!"

Naturally, being chased by such a creature made everyone flee as one.

At the third barrier stone, Gaines knelt and held the tray above his head, pouring even less water than before. He had spilled a bit more on the way. It would be faster if he just fell and spilled it all. Near the stone, the priest acting as judge spoke to me and Gaines in a low voice, trying not to look in *that* direction.

"..... Um..... that person over there..... who is she?"

There was no need to say who. It was Naga the White Serpent, standing and waiting for us to finish pouring the water.

'Heh. No need to worry. I'm just a serial killer lurking in the forest.'

You're going to stick with that character?

"..... I... I see..... that's very polite of you..."

The priest spat out a nonsensical comment, still without making eye contact. Naturally, the surrounding spectators had long since dashed away. Naga waited for me and Gaines to finish pouring.

'---Well, then.'

Naga started to move.

"Y-you guys! Stop her!"

Gaines commanded the hired trio, but—

"I-it's impossible!" "I didn't hear anything about this kind of creature appearing." "I'm scared. I'm really scared."

They were completely backing off. They couldn't exactly run away since they were hired, but they were useless. Regardless of our situation—

'Ho-ho-ho-ho!'

Chased by the laughing Naga, we ran down the path. Next was finally the last saint statue. But we couldn't go on like this. I approached Gaines.

"I have an idea! You can stop her!"

"What?" His face showed a look of hope. He probably really wanted to do something about that creature, regardless of friend or foe.

"She's rampaging because you decided she and I were in cahoots! If you admit we aren't, she should calm down!"

"I see! I'll try it!"

Gaines spun around and shouted toward Naga. "I understand! You and Lina aren't in cahoots at all!"

'Ho-ho-ho-ho! And what of it?!'

"The story is different!"

Gaines panicked at Naga's answer. If he had thought about it for a second, he'd know that someone who would calm down from that wouldn't have rampaged in the first place. You can tell just by looking at her. But by the time he realized it, it was too late!

From an inescapable close range, Naga's tackle was about to hit Gaines. But at that moment!

"Oh no!"

Before my voice even finished, both mine and Gaines' cups clattered to the ground.

"..... Ugh....." "—The cups!" *Dill Brand!* "Watch out! *Explosion Array!*"

Perhaps he was hit in a lucky spot, because Gaines immediately groaned and sat up, realizing he was holding nothing. The one who unleashed the attack magic was the silver-haired woman of the trio!

Does this girl use spells?! Then why hasn't she used them until now? That question was solved a split second later. *BOOM!*

"Nohyaaaaaaa!" "Giuwa!"

The dirt erupting from the ground blew Naga away and simultaneously blew Gaines away! Her control of the spell was non-existent. Naturally, the tray and cup fell from Gaines' hands. At that moment—*clink!* A small, hard sound. One of the pebbles that had flown up hit the cup in my hand as I jumped back.

I hurriedly looked around and noticed the two cups rolling on the ground. Gaines looked at me.

"..... You too....." His voice was filled with fatigue and resignation.

I picked up my cup, placed it on the tray, and looked at the silver-haired woman. "Ah, man."

"Ugh—"

Showered with my reproachful sigh, the woman shrank back slightly. Then, Gaines, who had picked up his own cup, gave her a cold stare as well.

"B-but! I thought I'd help!"

As the girl cried out with teary eyes, the two men began to comfort her.

"Yeah. We know how you feel." "It can't be helped. Not with that." "I... I was doing my best....."

While that was going on, I looked around and realized Naga, who should have been blown away, was nowhere to be seen.

"Somehow, it ended up a total mess, didn't it?"

As we walked along the road together, Gaines spoke with a somewhat refreshed tone. After the two of us dropped our cups, we walked at a leisurely pace and arrived near the saint statue that was both the goal and the starting point. By the way, Gaines had dismissed the three people hired by the Lord halfway through, saying they'd had enough.

"But in this case, what happens?"

"What do you mean 'in this case'?" I asked back, still carrying my cup on the tray, while Gaines held his directly in his hand.

"I mean, when both of us have spilled the contents."

"In that case, I think it'll probably be a do-over."

"..... Probably. What a pain. But it won't go like this next time."

"You're full of motivation... looks like we've arrived."

A small shrine came into view at the end of the road. Priests and witnesses were around. Naga was also, having somehow beaten us there. Naturally, her face was visible now, she wasn't holding machetes, and she was in her usual outfit. Well, even so, she still stood out plenty.

The two of us reached the spot.

"Sorry, but it's a no-contest," Gaines said, turning his cup upside down and shaking it. It had probably dried out in the time since he spilled it. "We both spilled everything."

Not a single drop fell. The priests and villagers looked at each other in confusion at the declaration. Amidst that, I walked straight to the shrine, knelt, and held up the tray.

"Huh? Hey, what are you—"

Ignoring Gaines' question, I took the cup through the cloth and tilted it over the saint statue. A small stream flowed. It washed over the statue from head to toe. The color of the stream was, of course, the same as when it was poured. A stir went through the villagers.

"Wait a minuteeeeeeee!" Gaines' protest was close to a scream. "You! You've cheated! You cheated!"

After finishing all the procedures, I bowed to the saint statue according to the taught etiquette, stood up, and looked at him. "Where is the cheating?"

"..... Wh... where, you say...!" He stammered for a moment. "I don't know where, but cheating is cheating!"

"So, why is it cheating?"

"You dropped the cup! I saw it! If so, there shouldn't be any contents! You must have refilled it somewhere!" Gaines was enraged, but I answered calmly.

"Water remains. It's the same color as when we started. You were with me the whole time. Did you see me procure and refill the water?"

"..... I didn't see it, but...!"

As Gaines choked on his words, I gave a small shrug. "This must be a miracle the Saint performed. He responded to the villagers' feelings and caused a miracle to happen."

"There's no way that happened! What on earth did you do?!" Gaines gnashed his teeth for a while, but eventually, with a small sigh, he gave up. "Fine. It's my loss. I'll give up on changing this festival. I'll guarantee it. So tell me how you did it."

At the declaration of defeat, the priests and villagers buzzed, but of course, I wasn't going to listen to such nonsense. "Even if a small-timer like you says you'll stop—this is the Lord's plan, after all—"

"—Um! Lina-san!"

The one who cut in with a panicked voice was Felicia, who for some reason looked pale.

"..... It's very hard to say, but....." She lowered her voice slightly and pointed her palm toward Gaines. "This is the Lord, Lord Gaines Brassline."

"Yep."

"YOU'RE THE LORD?! AHHHHHHH!"

I screamed despite myself! I thought the mastermind wasn't here, but he was! From the very beginning! I mean, what is someone like a Lord doing here?!

"..... U-um....."

While I tried to organize my confused head, I turned to Gaines. "..... For real?"

"Yeah. Dead serious. So, my guarantee is solid. I won't go back on my word. Tell me how you did it."

I grinned. "Remember that guy I froze with a spell right at the start? I used a bit of that cold air to freeze the water inside my cup. Even now, there's still a bit of ice left."

"..... Dammit! You're good!"

Gaines barked a laugh, seemingly happy despite the loss. He then announced loudly to the village that the "Renewal Plan" was officially cancelled.

The "Evil Ambition" to turn the saint statue into a "Beautiful Girl Statue" was crushed by me and the Forest Murderer.

(Protect our Traditional Culture! Finished!)

Youth's Reckless Run, Has Begun:

It was happening again!

"Please! I beg of you!"

I watched an old guy in his forties bowing his head on the street and thought to myself: *Not this again.* It was a classic pattern. I'd get picked on by some thugs in the middle of town, blast them back with an attack spell, and then someone who witnessed my "bravery" would decide I had the perfect muscle for their personal errands.

The man had introduced himself as Meizan, the Mayor of this town, Aike. He told me a long-winded story about a group of "rampagers" on the highway near town and how he wanted me to give them a lesson. Of course, it was none of my business. If I listened to every request like this, I'd never get anywhere.

"If they were actually stealing things or hurting people, that would be one thing," I said, turning my back to him. "But shouldn't you just ask the officials or the neighborhood watch for help with this?"

"Of course I asked the officials! but they won't move!" the Mayor pleaded, refusing to give up. "They say that while the group is a nuisance to traffic, there's no actual physical harm! At this rate, the town's reputation will just keep getting worse!"

I had lost interest completely. If the reward had been good, that would be a different story, but the amount the Mayor "boldly" offered was honestly disappointing.

Aike was a large town facing an old highway, but empty houses and vacant lots were starting to stand out. A new road had been built elsewhere, causing the highway traffic to thin out and the town to slowly wither away. When I arrived, the number of people coming and going on the old road was sparse.

These rampagers supposedly appeared on that old highway and ran all over the place. To the town, it had a major negative image. But more than that... if my hunch was correct, a certain person I knew very well was definitely involved in this.

If that's the case, I have to stop it. For the sake of the world, for the sake of the people, and mostly for the sake of my own mental health. That was the real reason I accepted the request.

"Miss Lina!"

Mayor Meizan burst into the eatery on the first floor of the inn where I was waiting. It was the afternoon of the day after I'd taken the job. To avoid missing the target, I had stayed at the inn and arranged for someone to call me as soon as they appeared.

"I just got word from one of the young men! They've appeared on the old western highway!"

"Okay, lead the way!"

I stood up with a clatter and followed the Mayor out of the shop. Waiting outside was a covered carriage—they had even provided a shuttle.

"Please, get in! I'll take you to the site!"

As the carriage sped through the streets and reached the edge of town, a strange chanting began to mix with the sound of the wheels. I instinctively knitted my brows.

"We're almost there!" the Mayor shouted as the carriage slowed down.

Beyond the rows of houses, a road stretched out toward the green horizon in a gentle curve. On that wide road, I saw them.

"Hoh! Hoh! Hoh! Hoh! Hoh!"

Keeping a steady rhythm with their breathing, about a dozen men were jogging around the area!

They were quite a sight—mohawks, bald heads, guys with facial tattoos. Some were topless with towels around their necks, others wore vests directly over their bare skin. They looked like total thugs, but they all seemed to be only slightly older than me.

"......Um, Mayor?" I asked, hesitating as I stepped out of the carriage. "When you said 'dressing like they're practically naked' and 'shouting hoh-hoh'... you meant...?"

"As you can see, it's these men!" the Mayor whispered back in a low, grim voice.

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"I see, I see... screaming 'ho-ho-ho,' dressed in next to nothing... it certainly is a 'rampage' in the literal sense. But this is completely different from the opponent I was expecting! Dammit! This was pointless! I accepted the job! Which means what?!? Because of a misunderstanding, I'm stuck with this work— The Mayor's departing words and the sound of the wheel tracks echoed. I instinctively clutched my head. Over my shoulder, he had pointed his thumb toward the source of the noise.

"Well then, Miss Lina, I leave the rest to you!"

Gara-goro, gara-goro.

"He ran away."

".....Anyway. I was asked by the Mayor to come here and stop you guys."

"What? Stop us?"

".....Um, Miss Lina?"

Even so, I finally came to my senses at the Mayor's call. .....Either way..... just clutching my head wasn't going to solve anything. Anyway, I decided to finish this quickly. I let out a single sigh and raised my voice toward the running men.

"Whaaaaaat do you think you're doing!"

While still jogging and drenched in sweat, a man flashed a fearless, smirking grin.

"For what reason, and how, are you going to stop us?"

Certainly, there was likely no law to crack down on them, and it was probably just a nuisance to others. If they were going to quit over being lectured, they would have quit a long time ago.

"Oh, so it's the same thing?"

To the bewildered man, I spoke nonchalantly. Of course, he must have noticed our arrival long ago, but in response to my call, one man approached.

"Yes. You guys are running around in those outfits because you want to, so you're doing it."

He had a rugged build, a shaved head with no hair, and wore a leather vest over his bare skin. His age seemed about the same as the others. As the man came closer, he continued to jog in place.

"And just who are you?"

"I was hired by the Mayor—"

"Fireball!"

Dugaaaaan!

I instinctively opened my mouth wide. The light sphere I released exploded upon impact, scattering crimson flames! At the sudden strike, the men’s eyes widened, and they actually stopped in their tracks. By the way, that shot was fired toward a spot where no one was standing. No one was harmed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing all of a sudden!?"

The voice of the bald man was trembling—was it from fear, or simply because he was out of breath? In contrast, I didn't move a single eyebrow, waving my hand dismissively.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just doing the same thing as you guys."

"The Mayor says it's a nuisance because you're blocking traffic, but that's just the Mayor's own problem. You think you're not stealing things or hurting anyone, right? It's the same. I'm just firing off attack spells because I want to fire them off."

"So," I continued, "you might find it annoying because you might get caught in the blast, but that's your problem. I'm not specifically aiming at you. You have absolutely no right to complain to me!"

"What did you say?!"

The men behind him started fuming, but the bald one facing me silenced them. So, he was the leader.

"Fine. It’s the same. Just... try not to hit us. If you hit us, it’s your fault."

He gave a smirk and, without waiting for my reply, started running again while letting out those weird "ho-ho-ho" cries.

"Why, you little...!"

So that was how he wanted to play it. Internally, I was impressed. I had expected them to either run away in fear or try to fight back, but I never imagined they would choose the "just endure it" strategy. What should I do now? This was completely unexpected.

If I gave up now, I'd lose. If they attacked me after being provoked, I could blow them away without a second thought and solve this instantly. But I couldn't just blast them while they were doing nothing, and pulling back now to rethink the plan would be admitting defeat.

"Miss Lina...!"

The men flinched at the sound of the explosion, but this time they didn't even stop. They kept running. However, the fire and the noise were definitely putting pressure on them! Yes! This had become a battle of wills between me and them!

Would they give up first, or would I run out of patience? Facing the men who were letting out strained cries, I began to chant my next spell. The battle of wills didn't conclude that day. I kept firing spells until sunset, eventually stopping only because it got dark.

But! The next morning, I woke up determined. I ate breakfast at the inn's dining room and prepared to head out!

"No, wait! Please wait a moment!"

For some reason, the Mayor looked troubled by my enthusiasm.

"S-So... I don't know what method you're using to stop them, but those attack spells..." "But what?!" "Well, the residents have filed complaints saying the explosions are terrifying..."

Mayor Meizan, you have no backbone!

"If I pull back here, I lose! Lose!"

"Miss Lina...!"

At the roar, the men's bodies trembled! But this time, they continued running without stopping. However, the flames and the roar were definitely putting pressure on them! Yes! If it had come to this, it was a battle of wills between me and that lot! Would they give up first, or would I lose my patience first? Facing the men who were letting out strange cries with twitching faces, I began chanting the next attack spell. The battle of wills saw no conclusion that day. I kept firing spells until sunset, and finally ended because it got dark. But!

"No, well... it's being gouged out... and it's becoming a scary sight... well... I won't deny that."

"So, use some other method..."

"What are you saying, Mr. Mayor!"

I snapped at the timid Mayor! This was a battle of wills with the opponent!

"Wait a minute!"

However, for some reason, the Mayor looked troubled at my enthusiasm.

"I don't know what kind of method you're using to stop those guys, but attack spells—"

"If I pull back here, it's a loss, a loss!"

The bald man gathered everyone into a huddle and started a whispered consultation. .....Argh! If it's come to this! At that moment, as if repeating yesterday, Mayor Meizan came jumping in. So that I could respond no matter what the opponent did, I chanted the next spell under my breath. Eventually, the men nodded, and the bald man looked at me.

"You're right. We'll keep running as we please, so you keep firing your spells as you please too."

"Fireball!"

Dudooooooooon!

I fired the spell I had chanted consecutively, making sure not to hit them! Just as requested, I would simply continue firing spells!

Which meant—

"They've shown up!"

I said with great spirit.

"Leave it to me! Today for sure, with a spell that'll make them all lose their strength....."

"What....."

"Leave the method to me! You just take care of explaining things to the townspeople!"

"Waking up early isn't really my style."

As I said this and started walking, the Mayor still looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he watched me go without opening his mouth. Of course.

"There have been complaints from the residents that the roar of the spells is scary..."

Your backbone is weak, Mayor Meizan! I had already predicted that these guys would be thinking the same thing and would be here since morning. That's exactly why I headed out at this time.

When I left the inn, a carriage was parked outside, but since the Mayor was like that, he would probably be reluctant to transport me to the site. The road itself was safe, but the surrounding vegetation was scorched or frozen and withered, and the ground was...

Therefore, I headed to the same place as yesterday on foot. I went along the road with the same scenery I saw yesterday, and beyond where the rows of houses ended—

"Heh. You came today too?"

On the road stretching endlessly, like they were waiting for me, stood the men lined up in a row!

It went without saying. It was the group from yesterday, led by the bald man. The bald man crossed his arms and looked down at me.

"At the end of yesterday, your voice sounded pretty hoarse. I thought you might be lying in bed at home today."

In response, I let out a cold laugh.

"Right back at you. I thought you'd be scared from yesterday and wouldn't show up today."

Despite the obvious provocation, the bald man didn't move a single eyebrow.

"I'll praise you for that competitive spirit, though. Come to think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves yet. I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

"We are the 'Demon King Speeding Squad', and I am the leader, Regal."

.....The... Demon King Speeding Squad.

"Heh..... I see....."

I held back a laugh at the sheer lack of sense, but continued, "But for a 'speeding' squad, you look pretty pathetic."

"We look pathetic? Hah! You're just like the other narrow-minded adults after all! You can only judge by appearances! Our running is a rebellion against such adults! It's a ritual for freedom!"

He began to speak with a look of ecstasy.

"We'll be adults soon too. No! We'll end up being them! But when I look at the adults in town, they only seem to spend their time without knowing what's fun! I don't want to become an adult like that! But even those lackluster adults won't acknowledge us. In such a stifling world, only while we're running and cutting through the wind can we be free! This is, so to speak, the rampage of youth!"

It was the kind of speech that made me feel embarrassed just listening to it, but the members of the Speeding Squad were listening intently with shining eyes.

"We wanted to run fast, even just a little faster! We wanted to become the wind! So at first, we all rode horses around here! But eventually, one after another we were forbidden from using horses after being scolded by narrow-minded parents! But we didn't give up despite the persecution from those adults! If we don't have horses, we'll run with our own legs!! It's a matter of spirit! At first, we pretended to be on horses, making neighing sounds and hoofbeat noises with our mouths! But it was hard to breathe, so we settled on the current style! That is the trajectory of our glory!"

"Uooooooooh!" shouted the members of the Speeding Squad.

.....No..... I think that's more like a trajectory of a downfall rather than glory...

"Is that 'settled' style really okay....." I retorted weakly, but Regal spoke without hesitation.

"What's wrong with it!"

"No. Our goal is to make sure we aren't underestimated by the adults who act like they're dead and won't acknowledge us at all!"

"Well, I'm close to your age, so I understand the feeling of not wanting to be looked down on by adults... but your actions are wrong for that feeling. Clearly."

"Wrong? How?"

"How? More like everything! In the first place! Causing trouble for someone or standing out in a bad way will only get you rejected, not acknowledged! That's not 'something no one else can imitate,' it's just 'something no one else does because nothing good comes of it'! If you want to be acknowledged, you should do something worthy of acknowledgement!"

"Heh..... Naive....."

Regal flashed a fearless smirk.

"There's some truth to what you say. But to do what you call 'worthy of acknowledgment' requires effort! However! Effort seems like a lot of work, so I don't want to do it!"

At his declaration, the Speeding Squad all nodded in unison.

. . . . . Ah . . . . . So.....

I pressed my fingers to my temples.

".....Okay, I get it. Then you guys can just keep running as much as you like..... though I don't think the day will ever come where everyone acknowledges you."

"Shut up. We won't stop running even if you tell us to! Men! Let's show this woman our run!"

"Yeah!"

At Regal's command, they all started running around with their "ho-ho-ho" strange cries.

.....All right, fine! Then I'll teach you what real terror is!

I thought as I began to chant a spell—but at that moment!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Along with their voices, someone's stupid laughter echoed

They Mingled with their voices in unison, I heard someone's idiotic laughter echoing!

—That voice!

I hurriedly turned around to look, and there, amongst the sound of wheel tracks echoing loudly, a single shadow stood tall on the roof of the carriage appearing from the town.

A black cloak! Shoulder guards with spikes and a skull necklace around the neck! Pointlessly revealing clothing! Long black hair fluttering in the wind. Yes! She was my self-proclaimed rival, a walking contradiction in human form! The eternal lost soul, Naga the White Serpent!

The reason I accepted the Mayor's request was none other than my conviction that this woman was involved in the incident! However, the reality was different, and her timing for appearing without any context was impeccable!

At that moment, I realized! The idiotic laughter Naga had been letting out just a moment ago had now completely stopped!

This was bad! I instinctively kicked off the ground—at the same time!

"Bomb Di Wind!"

Bugobouuuu!

The hurricane born from Naga's "Words of Power" licked the world with a roar! I didn't resist the wind, kicking off the ground and riding the wind to kill the impact as I landed! I turned around to see the members of the Speeding Squad blown away by the gale!

From atop the stopped stagecoach, Naga jumped down with a flourish, hands on her hips and chest puffed out, letting out her usual idiotic laugh!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I heard there were people rampaging and ruining the highway, so I came to see, and it’s nothing impressive at all!"

"Wa..... Wait a minute! Such rough handling..."

Mayor Meizan, who had gotten off the carriage, hurriedly voiced his complaint, but of course, Naga was not the type to reflect on such things.

"Hmph! What are you saying, Mayor Maizan!? Weren't you the one who asked me to solve this in the first place!?" "Then let me ask you, Naga. Didn't you hear from the Mayor that he wanted this handled *peacefully*?" "I didn't hear that."

Naga brushed her hair back and answered instantly, causing a look of agitation to cross Mayor Maizan’s face.

"What is the meaning of this!?" I raised my voice, and Naga looked at me as if she had only just noticed I was there. "I told you so!" "Oh, Lina, were you there? Your chest is so small I didn't notice you at all! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I let out a sigh and cast a sympathetic glance at the Mayor. *Gugh*. She just had to go and say the one thing she shouldn't in the middle of this mess!

But! The death penalty for Naga would have to wait until I clarified the situation!

"I heard you requested Naga's help, but what's the deal, Mayor! Asking Naga to handle things peacefully is like trying to put out a fire by pouring oil on it!"

When I questioned him, the Mayor looked troubled. "Do... do you two know each other...? What do you mean 'what's the deal'... I was in a bind because you wouldn't listen to me, and then this woman showed up... She was dressed somewhat similarly

to those reckless runners, so I thought maybe she could communicate with their hearts..."

"Communicate!? In the first place, she's dressed like someone who can't even hold a decent conversation! And in fact, she isn't communicating at all!" "Hey, Lina, how rude! Saying I can't hold a conversation!"

I turned a cold eye toward the snapping Naga and said, "Unfortunately, it’s too late now..." "Wait, Lina! You make it sound as if I'm constantly causing problems!" "You weren't aware of it!?"

I was genuinely shocked by Naga’s misplaced protest.

"Aware of what!? Perhaps you've misunderstood something because you've seen everyone except me get nervously agitated over trivial matters?"

"Th-at-is-not because everyone else is nervous, it's because *you* alone are insensitive!" "Ho-ho-ho-ho! That attitude of assuming your own side is the standard! Your perspective is narrow, Lina Inverse!" "That’s my line!"

Naga flashed a fearless smile at me. "It seems you also received a request from the Mayor to stop those reckless runners on the highway." ".....A-actually, I asked to stop them *peacefully*, so please keep that in mind," Mayor Maizan hurriedly interjected from the side, but it was unclear if he was being heard.

"In that case!" Naga looked around at the members of the Demon King Reckless Run Brigade, who were finally starting to get up after recovering from the damage of her spell. "Between you and me, which one is more peaceful? Let's settle this by seeing who can stop these guys more peacefully! Lina!" "I accept!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

The members of the Brigade let out voices mixed with surprise and dissatisfaction, but I glared at them sharply.

"I don't suppose... after talking so big to me, you're going to say you're losing your nerve and quitting just because you took one of Naga’s attack spells? You aren't that spineless, are you?"

As I pinned them down, Naga also directed a sharp gaze at the men. "You lot! If you're reformed by Lina's persuasion, don't think you'll get off easy!"

"Wait a minute, Naga! That's a threat!" "Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! If that's a threat, then what you just said was a threat too!" "It wasn't!"

Naga and I glared at each other head-on. As our gazes threw sparks, Mayor Maizan asked timidly from the side, ".....I'd like to ask you two just in case. You both know the meaning of the word 'peaceful,' right...?"

Naga brushed her hair back with a confident laugh. "Hmph! What a foolish question! In short, it’s just a matter of making sure there's no one left to complain, right!?"

I snorted at her brain-dead answer. "Listen, Naga. The way you put it makes it sound like you're going to silence everyone who complains."

"Listen. 'Peaceful' means that, in the end, no one dies—except for me and—"
"Are you really going to leave it to these... Wait a minute, Mayor!"

For some reason, Regal, the leader of the Brigade, turned pale at Naga’s answer. At his extremely rude question, the Mayor responded resolutely, "Of course. If I try to stop them poorly, I'll get caught in the crossfire."

".....Well, whatever." "In that case, let's begin."

Faced with the trembling Reckless Run Brigade, Naga and I each began to chant our spells.

"I'm telling you now, Lina, from here on, I'm going to get serious."
"Heh. So you weren't serious until noon? Don't make me laugh, Naga."

As we walked side by side down the road, Naga and I exchanged banter. It was noon on the day our contest to peacefully resolve the Reckless Run incident began. We had temporarily returned to town, ate a meal on the Mayor's tab, and were heading back to the highway.

".....Huh...?" I muttered, knitting my brows. The road curved ahead, and bushes were snapped in half. Several large craters had formed, and numerous fragments of

stone golems were scattered around. One could infer what kind of "peaceful" things Naga and I had done during the morning from that scene.

"Maybe they're all still eating?" Naga also looked perplexed at my mutterings. A carriage was parked nearby; it seemed the Mayor and the driver had returned a step ahead of us. But there wasn't a single sign of the Reckless Run Brigade.

"They aren't here..." ".....I think they got fed up and went somewhere else..." Mayor Maizan muttered.

"Whaaaaaaaat!?"

Naga and I shouted in anger together! Those Demon King Reckless Run Brigade jerks! I couldn't believe they ran away so easily when we hadn't even finished! How selfish!

I let out a scream of rage. "The match isn't settled yet!" "Hmph! It can't be helped! A temporary truce, Lina! First we find them, then the match resumes!"
"Fine! So, Mayor Maizan! Do you have any idea where they went? If not, tell me where that leader guy Regal lives!"

".....No..... but..... if they've withdrawn, maybe we should just leave them be..... No, no, I'll tell you. I'll tell you, so please stop looking at me with those murderous eyes. I don't know where their hangout is, but Regal's house is the one with the blue roof facing the crossroads by the church....."

"Blue roof, got it! Let's go, Naga!" "Hmph! Understood!"

The two of us nodded and chanted our spells.

"Um...! Please, inside the town, be peace—" Ignoring the Mayor—who was likely giving a formal warning—the two of us...

"Are you big brother's friends?" Standing there looking up at me was a very cute boy, maybe about five years old. ".....Regal's... little brother?" "Raywing!"

Casting the spell in unison, we took to the air! Using the high-speed flight magic that cloaks the body in a wind barrier, we soared into the sky!

"Yep! I’m Madi!" The boy raised his right hand with a bright smile. I remembered where the church was. After traveling a short distance, we reached the area in question. And nearby, there was a single house with a blue roof!

I crouched down, bringing my eyes to the same level as Madi’s, and communicated my intent. When Naga and I dispelled our magic and landed, we exchanged a glance, reaching an understanding in an instant. Naga nodded and entered a nearby alley. I timed it for when she would likely reach the back of the house.

"—Regal! Are you there?" I called out loudly while knocking on the front door. This way, if the opponent tried to escape through the back door, Naga would spot him.

I stayed silent to observe, and felt a presence moving inside the house. The presence wasn't heading toward the back, but toward me. Before long, the front door opened with a click.

He was so cute... unlike his brother. "I'm Lina, an acquaintance of your big brother Regal. I thought I'd meet him near the highway to the west, but he wasn't there. Do you know where else their hangout—the place where everyone gathers—is?" "Yeah. I know!" Madi pointed north. "Over there, where it goes 'mooo'!"

No. I didn't get it. I didn't understand, but it was an impossible task to ask a child of this age to explain things clearly. At this rate, it was even doubtful if the direction he pointed was correct. .....Hmm... in that case, I'd have to use flight magic to search from above... but considering the size of the town, it would take time, and I wouldn't be able to find them if they were under roofs or trees.

While I was thinking about various things, Madi shouted, "This way!" and dashed off! "Eh? Wait...?" I hurriedly chased after him. "Hey!? Are you... going to guide me?" When I asked, he stopped, turned around, and said, "Yeah! Guide!"

Well, I appreciated the kindness. I looked back and forth between Madi and the wide-open front door. "But weren't you supposed to be staying home?" When I asked, the boy... there was no one else in the house. I had thought that was the case. "Then you shouldn't go out." "I’m bored! It's fine!"

He was itching to run. I see. He was bored staying home, so he was using the role of guide as an excuse to go outside.

Well then, I'd take him up on that kindness. Even if I was going to make his brother cry later. "Alright, then let's close the front door before we go. Also, wait a second while I call my frie... acquaintance."

At his smiling reply, I closed the house door and called out, "Naga! Secured a collaborator! Come around here!" Shortly after I called... "Ho-ho-ho-ho!" Hearing the

stupid laughter, Madi raised his voice at the sight of Naga running toward us. "It's big brother's friend!"

Sigh... I see. So we really do look like friends. We're both dressed strangely and letting out weird cries. "Who is that child, Lina?" "Regal's brother, Madi. He says he'll guide us."

Just as I said that. "What are you doing to that child!?" I looked toward the voice and saw Mayor Maizan leaning out of a carriage that was approaching us.

"It seems you followed us—" I wondered if he thought we were going to do something to the kid. How rude. "He's just guiding us! Follow us!" That said, keeping pace with a child's walking speed seemed like it would be a bit of a pain.

"I know, Madi. As a thank you for guiding us, I'll carry you with flying magic." "Fly!? Really?" "Yeah. Come here. Don't struggle, okay?"

I held Madi, who was nodding vigorously with sparkling eyes, from behind and chanted the spell in my mouth. "Raywing!"

We took to the sky with the high-speed flight spell! "Wow! I'm flying!!" "——Ow!" I let out a small yelp, cancelled the spell, and landed. Naga landed beside me immediately after.

I could hear mooing. There must be cattle in the shed. Once the spell was dispelled and the wind barrier vanished, the sounds became clear. There was an empty lot next to the shed, which connected directly to the grassy fields outside of town. Regal and the rest of the Demon King Reckless Run Brigade—about a dozen of them—were there.

"Th-they came!" The men let out terrified screams, and among them, the one who voiced his panic was none other than Regal. "Hiiiieeee!?"

I was holding Madi in my arms, and he was frolicking.
"B-Big bro—"
"You monster!" Cutting off his brother's words, Regal glared at me with an angry gaze. "I knew that was your plan! How dare you take my brother hostage! You coward!"
"Miss Lina! No matter how you look at it, that's going too far!"

Hearing Regal's misplaced protest, Mayor Maizan, who had followed in the carriage, also turned pale and raised his voice! "You're wroooooong! Mayor! What do you mean 'I knew it'!?" I was practically screaming at this point. Now that he mentioned it, my

current posture holding Madi from behind might look like that... but I let him go and glared Regal straight in the face.

"Regal! I had him guide me to where you were likely to be! Right, Madi?" "Yeah!" "—That’s how it is! If you guys hadn't run away in fear from mine and Naga's 'peaceful negotiations,' your brother wouldn't have been involved!"

Even I felt that, depending on how you heard it, that sounded a bit like a villain's line; but I decided not to think about that too much.

"In fear, you say!? Don't make me laugh! Stop making arbitrary assumptions! We just got bored of the previous spot! Hmph. Not a single person is afraid of your spells!"

I silently took a deliberate step forward. "——Hiiiiiieeee!?" The members of the Brigade cried out in response and scrambled backward!

"......Hmm. So you aren't afraid."
"We aren't!" Regal insisted, but his voice was trembling at the end. ......Well, after the 'peaceful negotiations' Naga and I had put them through all morning, the fact that he could still be stubborn was impressive enough.

"No! Even if someone were to run away in fear of your actions now, that wouldn't be your victory! Because after they run away in fear, they'll just start their reckless run somewhere else out of your sight! We will keep running! No matter what! That alone is our victory!"

Regardless of the content, the members of the Brigade cheered at his energetic declaration. .....Tch..... What a pain..

If they continued to run, completing the request would become impossible. That meant I might have to pay out of my own pocket for everything I had eaten and drunk on the Mayor's tab! I had to avoid that at all costs. I was just thinking that I might as well blow the whole Reckless Run Brigade away with a relatively serious attack spell, when—

"Big brothers, are you gonna run?" Madi asked with a puzzled look in his eyes. "Yeah. We're gonna run." At his brother's answer, Madi flashed an innocent smile. "I wanna do it too! Playing horsey!"

Play... playing horsey... I don't know what kind of misunderstanding led to that comment, but... wait, I see! This might be useful. Regal gave a bitter smile at Madi's words. "Hey now, Madi, we aren't playing horsey. It's fine, you just go on home now."

"No, no, no. You *were* doing it. Playing horsey."

I chimed in immediately. "You guys ran with horses at first, but when you couldn't use horses anymore, you ran while imitating the neighing and the sound of hooves with your mouths—" I crouched down and asked Madi, "Madi, when you saw your big brother and the others running while saying things like 'neigh' and 'clippity-clop,' you thought they were playing horsey, right?" "Yeah! He said I should definitely do it too!" "That's why I said wait! Don't mock us! Our running isn't like that!"

Regal raised his voice desperately, but I directed a cold smirk at him. "Whaaaaaat are you talking about? No matter what your intentions are, if you're imitating a horse, it's playing horsey. What you're doing now is just healthy jogging. You saw clearly just now that to an outsider—even to a child—it doesn't look like anything else!"

The members of the Brigade stirred and murmured as the five-year-old nodded vigorously and without hesitation. I kept going. "Well, certainly, that really isn't anything other than playing horsey, is it? Doing that at your age."

"At your age, doing things like that... how does it look to those around you? You might be misunderstanding the way the adults keep their distance as 'holding you in high regard,' but... that's not it! They aren't holding you in high regard; they're just completely put off!"

"P-put off...!" Regal groaned softly at my point. "......P-put.....!" The Brigade buzzed at my remark.

"Yes. To put it in perspective!" I pointed sharply at Naga. "It's the same feeling a normal person gets when they see *this* and back away!"
"Hey, Lina! How rude!" Naga raised her voice in protest, but agitation spread further among the Brigade. "Th... the same...?" "Us... and *that*...?"

Alright! Time for one more push! "It's only natural to want to be recognized by people! To not want to be mocked! But! When the means to achieve that are hopelessly wrong, or even worse, when the means replace the goal, before you know it, you even lose sight of yourself! And the end result is *this*! *THIS*! Do you want to become like this!?"

"What do you mean by 'this'!?" Naga was wailing about something, but of course, no one paid her any attention. The members of the Brigade bit their back teeth.

"That... I don't want that....."

"Are you saying our methods were wrong...!"

"Hey, Regal... what should we do...!" Of course, even if he was asked, Regal had no way to answer.

"Answers are things you find for yourself, aren't they?" I declared to them. "If you don't, you'll just be mocked. You hate being given orders by adults, but it's okay if it's from Regal? That’s proof you aren't thinking for yourselves! That’s not rebellion against adults; it's just a temper tantrum!"

"The Demon King Reckless Run Brigade is disbanded as of today." No one objected to the declaration. "Well, on the flip side, once you can think with your own heads and walk properly on your own two feet, you'll be grown up. No one will mock you then."

Regal was silent for a while, but eventually, he crouched down and spoke not to me, but to Madi. "Madi, did what I was doing look like playing horsey?" "......Yeah..... Is it different?" Perhaps sensing the strange atmosphere in his childish way, Madi looked uneasy. Regal stood up quietly and looked around at the members of the Brigade.
"......I don't really know what we should do either." Regal smiled slightly. "But—yeah, that really was just playing horsey, wasn't it?"

Everything ended, and on the way back to town, while being shaken in the Mayor's carriage, I spoke. By the way, the members of the Brigade had disbanded on the spot. Madi had headed home together with Regal.

"So, that means I won the match, so the request fee that Naga was supposed to get is also mine—" "Wait a minute, Lina!" Naga, who was also in the carriage, cut off my words. "Who ever made such a promise!? For that matter, when was it decided that you won the match!? I should have been sufficiently peaceful too!"
"In what way!?"

"Now, now, you two—" It was the Mayor who instantly turned the explosive atmosphere into a peaceful one.

"As for that, I'll let the two of you discuss it thoroughly later—but first, can we talk about the pluses and minuses regarding the request fee for you two and the repair costs for the western highway that got completely wrecked? *Peacefully.*"

"*Guh*." The sound of the stagecoach wheels filled the silence as we were left speechless.

(Youth's Reckless Run, Has Begun: Finished)

Oh, Life Has Its Ups and Downs

In life, there are many times when one hesitates over a choice. For example, when someone is being ganged up on and beaten by a large group of people. If the person getting beaten is a normal person, I'd temporarily stop it and hear the circumstances; if they look like a thug, I'd watch with a smile, thinking, "Ah, the citizens are standing up against evil."

But. If the "Lord" of the land was a person who looked exactly like a punk... I stopped nearby, thought for a moment, and voiced the most likely situation I could infer. "Could it be—are you waiting for a punchline?" "Why... would you say... that....." The man who was being beaten recognized me and managed a weak retort.

Red hair, with a jagged tattoo on his left cheek. A leather jacket and a wide belt. It wasn't a mistake. This punkish man being pummeled to their heart's content by the general public was indeed the Lord who ruled this area, Gaines Brassline... or at least, he was supposed to be. He was a man who, no matter how you looked at him, didn't look like a Lord, whom I had encountered a while back during an incident involving a certain traditional culture.

However, being beaten to a pulp by the people of his own territory... his lack of "Lordliness" was really reaching new heights. If I were to consider my own position, I should probably call him with a suffix or try to use polite language... but I don't know why. If I did that, I felt like I'd lose at life.

"This guy came here to sponge off of Mr. Leas-tight!"
"Mr. Leas-tight?" "Yeah. He's the Mayor here."

Anyway, the townspeople stopped moving at my words and Gaines' reaction, looked over here, and one of them asked aggressively, "Who are you? Are you this guy's comrade?" I flashed a bright smile.

"Ahahaha. Of all things, a comrade. Do you know there are jokes you can say and jokes you shouldn't say in this world?" My accuser apologized, somehow feeling pressured. I gave a small shrug. "Ugh.....! S-sorry, I guess....." "Well, I'm definitely not his comrade, but I do know his face... What did he pull this time?" I asked in a detached tone asi looked toward the back of the town. This place, Lisril, was a small

town with a slightly deserted feel. It was surrounded by gentle hills and trees, and at the end of it, atop a hill, stood a fine mansion.

A Lord who comes to a Mayor's house to sponge off him... what on earth...? There might be circumstances, but that was none of my business. Still, I felt a bit bad just walking away. So, I said in a tone that made it sound like someone else's problem: "I see. In other words, you can't forgive this guy for trying to trouble the Mayor." "That's right." "If he's loved by everyone that much, that Mayor must be a really good person." "Yeah. We've all been looked after by that person."

The men nodded proudly, but I clouded my brow. "But if they're such a good person, you have to be careful. If you guys accidentally kill that guy, surely the Mayor will be sad. They'll think, 'Someone died because of me,' or 'I made the townspeople into murderers.'"

Whether the provocative word "murderer" worked or not, the men looked at each other awkwardly at my "advice." "......Well, even we don't really intend to go that far....."

"It can't be helped. Let's let him off around here."

"Don't you ever pull a stunt like this again." They scattered, leaving behind their parting shots. I gave a small nod, turned on my heel, and...

"......Y-you saved me..... I guess meeting in a place like this is some kind of fate....." Ignoring Gaines as he muttered something, I walked away without hesitation. "Hey, wait...! I have something to talk about...!" Ignoring the "auditory hallucination" drifting on the wind, I left the town of Lisril behind...

"Two gold coins just to listen!"

"......I'll just listen." I had no choice but to answer that way, and I stopped in my tracks.

"Look. There's that folk legend, isn't there?"

Gaines started the conversation as he settled onto a decaying tree stump. We were in a forest a short distance off the main road, having left the town of Lisril. The townspeople viewed him as a villain, so holding a long discussion in the town or on the highway was out of the question; we had to leave town and talk in a place like this.

Though it wasn't the lush season, there were plenty of evergreens among the standing timber. Even if someone passed by on the road, we likely wouldn't be seen.

"A folk legend?" leaning my back against a tree trunk, I repeated his question.

"Oh, I know it, I know it," I replied with a disinterested air.

The "Royal Watergate." It was a fairly popular folk legend with countless variations and numerous protagonists with different names. Often, the name of a royal who actually existed in that region in the past was used, and "Watergate" was just one of those patterns.

The plot involved an old man of royal blood carrying the Watergate name who would travel around various places with his attendants, punishing corrupt lords and ruthless merchants. Even if the name of a real person was used, the stories themselves were said to be later inventions—yet, quite a few people seemed to find romance in the tale.

"That's it! Since I've become a lord myself, I thought I'd give it a try!"

...I had heard that there was no end to fools like this. Gaines didn't even notice the sigh I let slip; instead, his eyes sparkled as he continued.

"It's cool, right? Exposing the deeds of scoundrels and thrashing them! Then finally revealing your identity and making the villains grovel!"

"But aren't you usually the one being hunted?"

"Don't say 'the one being hunted'! What's wrong with having something to admire? Rumor has it the Prince of the Holy Kingdom is doing undercover inspections in seirune, and I bet that’s because of this song's influence, too."

I nodded at Gaines's explanation. If it were true that a Prince of Seirune was conducting undercover inspections, I might have wanted to dream of a fateful encounter and marrying into wealth, but after all, this was coming from *him*. It was better to assume it was just sleep-talking or something.

"Anyway, that's why I picked out two attendants and set out on a journey to set the world right! Only within my own territory, though!"

"...'Set the world right,' huh... for someone doing that, I feel like you weren't doing anything good at the last place..." As I muttered with a sideways glance, Gaines looked away awkwardly.

"Mmph... well, I do feel like I might have been a bit too reckless with my methods there. My two attendants got grumpy about it and went home..."

"So that's why you're alone."

"But look—" Gaines looked around this deserted spot and lowered his voice.

"This time, it seems I've hit the jackpot. Basically, it looks like the Mayor, Leisetite, is up to something."

"Do you have proof?" I asked listlessly.

Gaines nodded with full confidence. "I heard a strange story. When the lordship changed hands, taxes shot up like crazy, but in this town, Leisetite supposedly covered it with his own fortune so they only had a small increase. But see, the new lord—that's me—never raised taxes in the first place."

"—Ho."

"Right? What I'm thinking is, Lord Leisetite is acting like a saint while using the change in leadership as an excuse to fleece the townspeople. He's handing the bad reputation to me while he pockets the cash. So, I devised a plan! I stormed into his place and shouted, 'I know you're deceiving the people and skimming the taxes!'"

"That's not a plan at all!" I couldn't help but snap back.

"What are you saying! In the legend of Royal Watergate, they go straight in and point out the villain's misdeeds!"

I was speechless for a while. When I finally opened my mouth, I asked, "Didn't you... didn't you have anything to prove your identity?"

"I had it! One of the attendants who went home had it... I was kicked out of the mansion, but I was still revealing my deductions to denounce the villain... and then, well, the townspeople beat me up."

I fell silent for even longer, wondering where to even begin.

"That's, how do I put it... from the bottom of my heart, you really just look like a common thug who came to extort him."

"What did you say!?"

"Question," I said, raising my hand to silence the fuming Gaines. "A person in suspicious clothing comes to town, visits the house of the well-respected Mayor, and suddenly bellows, 'I know you're doing evil!' When the Mayor tries to ask them to leave, they start shouting insults in front of the house. Now, here is the problem: what is the true identity of that person?"

"That’s obvious! They're a common extortionist thug!"

"Exactly."

"Wait a minute! ...Wait, are you talking about me!?"

He finally noticed.

"That's exactly it. No matter what the truth is, if it doesn't look convincing to an outsider, they won't believe it. That's what I'm saying. To me, it wasn't just a tactical error—it wasn't even a tactic."

At my pointed remark, he fell silent with a bitter expression for a moment before admitting, ".....Well... I suppose I'll concede there was a slight flaw in my plan."

"Slight?" I retorted. "If you have evidence, you're the lord, so you should have the authority to just follow formal procedures and move the officials, right?"

"That's the thing!" Gaines stood up from his stump and stared straight into my eyes. "Since I've said this much, you can guess. I want to borrow your strength to expose Leisetite's crimes."

"I see... I understand the situation."

"Then—"

"I've listened to the story, so that'll be two gold coins."

"Help me!!" Gaines shouted, sounding like a complete brat. He flailed about, yelling, "It's no use anyway because those incompetent officials move so slow they'll never catch his tail! So I have to do it undercover!"

"Are you completely denying your own administration?"

I went silent. Seeing my silence as a chance to persuade me, Gaines doubled down. He argued that Leisetite must have been doing this for a long time and was likely working with auditors or falsifying documents, meaning formal methods wouldn't work.

Listening to him, I thought he might actually be right. It was hard to imagine a respected mayor suddenly becoming a villain just because the lord changed. It was more natural to think he had been skimming taxes under a mask of goodness all along.

"Think about it! I'm trying to be kind and stop him from tricking the townspeople! And I'm not asking you to work for free! I'm saying I'll pay! You stuck your nose in so helpfully last time, yet you're being so cold now! Hey!"

...He was annoying. Even though what he was saying was technically reasonable, his thug-like way of speaking made it oddly irritating.

"Fine," I said, holding up one finger. "But—the plan will be made by me. If I leave it to you, you'll go off the rails. Also, the reward will include an extra two gold coins for listening to your story."

"Fine. It's a deal."

As Gaines nodded with a smirk, I immediately began the detailed negotiations for my commission fee.

A clear flute melody drifted on the wind. People walking through the town stopped and turned toward the source of the sound. There were two figures.

One was a red-haired young man in his mid-twenties. With handsome features and a draped cloak, the way he played the transverse flute with downcast eyes was quite a picture.

This was, in fact, Gaines in disguise. It was the first stage of the plan I had devised. I had suggested it thinking it was a bit of a stretch, but he had transformed surprisingly well.

We changed his hairstyle and used a spare cloak of mine to hide his clothes. The markings on his cheeks—which I thought were tattoos—turned out to be paint and wiped off easily with a cloth. He happened to have a flute as a hobby, and as it turned out, he was actually quite good at it.

"He's actually a rookie minstrel," I said, gesturing toward Gaines.

Among the people who stopped were some of the men who had beaten Gaines earlier. Their faces showed confusion. They likely recognized his face but were bewildered by the drastic change. Gaines offered a polite bow to a man who had previously pummeled him.

"I apologize for the disturbance earlier."

When he spoke in a proper tone, the man grew even more confused, looking back and forth between me and Gaines.

"The songs minstrels prefer are those of heroes or tragic love," Gaines spoke—not in his usual thug dialect, of course. As a lord, he had been drilled in social etiquette, and I had instructed him to use that manner of speech.

"Songs of swords and magic stir the heart, and tragedies move the soul," Gaines continued melodiously. "However, I believe virtuous statesmen should be praised more. I find beauty in the way they protect the peace and livelihoods of the people. I heard rumors of Mayor Leisetite's reputation even in nearby towns. I wanted to know the truth, not just exaggerated rumors, so I disguised myself to gather stories. I caused a stir this time, but it was worth it to see how much the people love him."

"So... that stuff about complaining to Mayor Leisetite...?" one townsperson asked hesitantly.

"Of course, it was an act to see his character. I must go and apologize to him later," Gaines replied instantly with a bright smile.

It was a total lie I had cooked up. If one thought about it calmly, there were plenty of holes. But people have a tendency to accept an explanation that makes sense of a confusing situation as long as it doesn't harm them.

"I heard that when the new lord recklessly increased taxes, Mr. Leisetite stepped in and persuaded him to exempt only this town," Gaines continued.

"No, that's not right," one man blurted out.

Hook, line, and sinker. Instead of asking from scratch, presenting a slightly incorrect version of the facts makes people want to correct you, making it easier to draw out the truth.

"Oh? Is it different? Was this town taxed more, then?"

"Ah, no, it's not that..."

The man opened his mouth just as I expected.

"Ah, I see," Gaines smiled knowingly. "Then Mr. Leisetite must have told you to keep it quiet. If people in other towns knew only this town had tax favors, it would cause jealousy and needless trouble, right?"

That wasn't in my script, but...

"How... how did you know that?" the townsperson gasped.

I see. If the people here talked to those from other towns, they'd realize immediately that there had been no tax hike. Leisetite must have told them not to speak of taxes to outsiders for some made-up reason.

"Ah, life has its ups and downs, but this isn't good. Yeah. It definitely isn't good."

Gaines used his signature catchphrase—and several others—with a cheap, practiced air. It seemed he had finally managed to deceive them; the townspeople were nodding deeply. I gave him a small nod back, and Gaines, sensing my lead, began weaving ad-libbed lines into the performance.

I used to think he was just a person whose brain was focused entirely on being a nuisance, but perhaps he was more of an actor than I had originally given him credit for.

"If that's the case, I'll help you out!"

As the townspeople, swept up in the moment, raised their voices in a chorus of cheers, I didn't miss the sight of several men quietly slipping away from the circle. However, that raised another question... though now wasn't the time to verify it. I decided to play along with Gaines, waving my hand dismissively.

"Ah, well, there's no need to be so concerned then."

"So? What's the deal?" I asked him. "How did you find out about that?"

"Oh. Is that all it is?" Gaines replied, looking bored. "It’s nothing special. It’s because things were looking dismal."

"Dismal...?" I frowned as I questioned him.

He continued, "I *am* a Lord, you know. I receive reports on the economic situation of various regions. Even in the town I visited before coming here, I heard people saying how great the town of Risril was."

"Huh? Great in what way?"

He was still dressed as a fake pseudo-minstrel, but his tone had returned to his natural way of speaking. After leaving Risril and walking along a deserted highway, I had waited for the right moment to pose the question to him.

"The word is already out. Even if you hear it, I won't say anything about the situation I'm in."

"Well, according to those reports, Risril was supposed to have a bumper crop this year. If that’s true, the economy should be booming. But when I actually got here, it wasn't just 'not great'—it was downright dismal. When I passed through secretly before, the harvest wasn't as good as this year's, but the town had more life in it then."

I see... I thought he was just a common-sense-deficient weirdo, but he can actually think about things more rationally than I expected.

However, for some reason, Gaines returned my high praise with a look of pure fury. "Hey, are you picking a fight with me?"

"Of course not."

"Oh... I mean, the testimony about the skimming went exactly as planned. Usually, you're the kind of guy who just charges into an opponent's place without a plan or any subtlety, so the world calls people like that—"

"I just got a bit carried away because things went exactly as I read them! My lack of thoroughness has been certified by my old man since I was a kid, you know!"

"No. That's not okay. That’s the most important part."

I looked at the trees lining both sides of the road. Between them, I could feel a presence closing in—judging by the sensation, probably five or six people.

"Wait right there!"

I continued walking for a while, pretending not to notice, until a thundering voice washed over us from behind. As the two of us turned around calmly, six men had rushed out from between the trees to pursue us.

"What do you think you're doing, suddenly blowing people away?!"

"Yes. But it seems the stories have been exaggerated. That's why I came to this town; I wanted to know the truth," Gaines continued with a pleasant smile. "Actually, just between us, I've heard rumors that the new Lord has been moved by Mayor Leasetite's noble deeds. If that’s true, I hope that by singing and spreading word of the Mayor's true character, it will touch people's hearts and make the world a little better. That is why I desperately want you all to tell me the truth, so I can spread it through song."

"Alright, I get it!"

After that, we were bombarded with praise for Leasetite by the townspeople—stories of how the Mayor had covered part of the tax increase with his private funds and various other tales. After leaving word that we would turn these stories into a song and spread them everywhere, we departed Risril.

"This is strange, I thought. If money isn't circulating where it's supposed to be, that means it's flowing somewhere else... but well, it looks like things will work out this time."

That was fine and all, but I said, "Leasetite told the townspeople not to talk about taxes to outsiders. Thinking about it, that’s natural. What I want to know is, how did *you* find out about the taxes that were supposed to be kept secret?"

"If it was something like being targeted by bandits, I’d have a report from the military, and the town would be in ruins, but there’s none of that. That’s why it clicked. 'This is skimming,' I thought. Once I had that hunch and laid a trap, the story came out easily. That's all there is to it."

I gave Gaines a meaningful look. He lowered his voice in response. "Oh. So that means—"

"Yeah. They're here."

I made sure not to turn them into charcoal, avoiding a direct hit, but that was enough. Every single one of them fell and lay there twitching.

.....

I didn't miss the look of confusion that crossed Gaines's face, and I pressed him further. "Your big moment isn't in a small place like this, is it?"

"Wait a minuteeeee!"

As I was about to strike a victory pose, Gaines snapped at me with teary eyes for some reason. "What was that for?! Why did you go and do that?!"

"Eh? What? What is it?"

Unsure why I was being scolded, I faltered. He wiped away his overflowing tears.

"Think about it! These guys are just underlings! Why did you have to take them out in a place like this where Leasetite isn't even around?!"

"Well... that's..."

The men were holding clubs and had their faces covered from the nose down with scarves, but clearly, some of the faces I had seen in Risril were among them.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gaines asked, not looking surprised at all. One of the men replied, "We can't let you go any further. Sorry, but this is where you—"

"**Fireball!**"

That was all I needed to hear! My single attack spell blew the men away without any ceremony or hesitation!

"See? But if you say that, it's obvious the answer will be a defiant, 'Of course!' I have no intention of arguing over such a trivial matter. I'll just play along and talk my way through this!"

I shook my head slightly from side to side. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

Even if we had questioned them directly or searched their houses to find evidence of the skimming, it’s doubtful we would have caught them red-handed. My true goal was this: to make Leasetite send assassins after us.

I spoke without changing my walking pace. Considering how unnaturally good his reputation was, there must have been people in the town who knew what Leasetite was doing and were helping with the information manipulation. If I played my cards wrong, I could have turned the whole town against us.

However, by pretending to be minstrels and leaving the town saying we would spread word of Leasetite's "great deeds," he couldn't ignore us. If he let us go, we’d spread the song in other towns, and the fake tax increase would be discovered. I created a situation where he had no choice but to send assassins—and then, by defeating them, I turned those assassins into living witnesses of his crimes. It wasn't a particularly new trick, but it was effective enough.

"Now—all that's left is the finishing touch."

I said this while looking back toward Risril.

"Stop itttttttt!" I screamed.

"I told you, my lack of thoroughness is certified!" Gaines said, still being held down by the underlings.

We had brought back only one of the assassins as a witness and barged into Leasetite's house. The moment he came out to meet us, Leasetite dropped into a prostrate bow (*dogeza style*). As he pleaded in a trembling voice for us to keep it a secret, Gaines got cocky. He started spitting out cool catchphrases from a superior position and approached while *skipping*—only to be easily seized by Leasetite's men who had been hiding nearby.

The reason I couldn't warn him in time, despite sensing the hidden presences, was obviously due to the "double surprise" combo of Leasetite’s sudden *dogeza* bowing and Gaines’s sudden skipping.

"This isn't 'lacking thoroughness,' it’s practically self-destruction! Just now! No matter how over the moon you were! You don't approach at high speed while skipping!"

Despite my shouting, Gaines actually wore a "cool" smirk. "Well, even if you say 'you don't,' this is just ‘my style’!"

"Shut up!"

So, after all that, this is the situation we’re in. Leasetite spoke up, ignoring our conversation without changing his expression.

"I don't think it's a bad deal."

This was the first time I had seen him clearly. He was a man in his fifties with white hair and a white beard—a grandpa with a gentle-looking face. His response to me was, of course—*Damu Brass*. He didn't look like a villain at all. His clothes and the furniture in the mansion weren't flashy; in fact, he looked much more like a decent human being than Gaines did.

"As you both know, I am earning a bit of pocket change through methods I can't speak of publicly, but that's about the extent of it. To be honest, I don't want to do anything too ambitious," he said calmly in a mild voice.

With this appearance and manner, it was no wonder the townspeople were deceived.

"I'm sure you don't want to experience anything unpleasant either. In that sense, I believe our interests align. What do you say? How about you forget everything, say nothing, and leave this territory—no, this country? I will, of course, give you plenty of extra travel funds. However, in exchange, I will have someone accompany you to ensure you actually leave. Since you are travelers anyway, you can live just as well outside this country or this territory, right?"

Damu Brass ("**Vibration Bullet!**")

With the strike I unleashed, a nearby sofa shattered, revealing a hidden underling. Watching the man scramble away in the corner of my eye, I said:

"I don't feel like this is an environment where we can have a sincere discussion."

"I have taken your companion into custody, but I haven't harmed him. Can't you see that as my maximum effort at sincerity?" he answered shamelessly.

Of course, I had no intention of believing a word Leasetite said. If he really wanted to talk, he wouldn't have sent assassins in the first place. If I agreed to the talk, he would just wait for a chance to slit my throat.

In that case, I had only one path to choose. "Gaines!" I called out to him while he was still captured.

"Huh? What?"

"Do you have a brother or something?"

"Ha? I do, but... what's this all of a sudden?"

"No, if you have one, that’s fine. I won't have to worry about the succession problem then."

I began chanting a spell. Gaines looked at me suspiciously. "...Succession... what are you talking..."

His expression cramped up in an instant. "W-w-wait! You! You! You’re going to blow everyone away, including me, with a spell, aren't you?!"

I looked away slightly and continued chanting.

"Is he serious...?"

"No... I've heard of this..."

A raspy voice responded to someone’s leaked murmur. "Wait a minute. The short height... the chest size... it's just like the rumors... no, it’s even more than the rumors...!"

"W... No way! Everyone, calm down!"

The underlings were buzzing at the dangerous words about blowing everyone up, but Leasetite didn't even move an eyebrow.

"If you're going to bluff, I'd appreciate it if you said something a bit more clever."

"You idiot, what are you saying?!" Gaines yelled at Leasetite with teary eyes. "Do you know who this woman is? It’s the 'Bandit' Killer' who even dragons step aside for—Lina Inverse! Lina Inverse! If she says she's gonna do it, she really means it!"

Wait. I really wanted to throw in a retort from the bottom of my heart, but if I did, the **Dragon Slave** I had worked so hard to chant would dissipate.

"Yeah... I've met her. She had a hatchet and chased me through the forest for ages."

The temperature in the room dropped even further at Gaines's explanation.

"...A... a... um... I..."

The incredibly raspy voice came from one of the underlings who had backed away to the edge of the room. "I... I happened to see her once... from a distance... probably... I think it's her..."

The space froze over with an audible snap.

"Then...!"

"The real...!"

"Lina Inverse!"

Several voices overlapped, and then—

"**HA-HAAAH!**" (We prostrate ourselves!)

Leasetite and every single one of his subordinates dropped into a simultaneous *dogeza bow*.

"...Eh... eeeeeeeeeehhh...? Eeeeh...?"

I raised my voice resonantly toward the prostrate Leasetite.

"Mayor Leasetite of Risril! Using the change of the Lord and your title as Mayor to defraud innocent citizens of money under the guise of a non-existent tax increase—it is already as clear as day!"

"H-Ha-haah! Your insight is terrifying!" The Mayor shrank back even further at the accusation.

"The fact that you sent assassins after us the moment we sensed the truth is the most immovable proof of all! There will be a severe sentence from the Lord coming later! Until then, stay quietly under house arrest!"

"Ha... haah...!"

Gaines raised his right hand as if he wanted to say something, seeing as I had stolen the role he wanted to play, but of course, no one paid him any mind. Next to the shrinking Mayor, I snapped at him to keep him quiet.

"You stay out of it, you'll just make it complicated."

".....Umm."

"We had no idea it was the world-renowned Lady Lina Inverse... please, please forgive our many insolences!"

Still flattened against the floor, Leasetite squeezed out a raspy voice.

Personally, there are things I don't quite accept about being feared this much based solely on rumors... but there was no reason not to use the situation. I canceled the spell for the time being.

At the crossroads on the outskirts of Risril. The incident had reached a stopping point for now, and as we were about to say goodbye, those were the words that came out of Gaines's mouth.

".....That was the role I wanted to play, though..."

"Now look. Of course, I received the commission fee, the borrowed mantle was returned, and once he wiped off that face paint, Gaines returned to his original form. What he’s complaining about is likely the fact that I snatched away the moment where he reveals his true identity and everyone bows down to him... personally, it's not like I particularly wanted to do that, but... in the first place, it's your own fault for getting carried away and getting captured. If it weren't for that, I might have been able to let you play that role just as you hoped. More than just having a weak finish, you really need to fix that habit of overreaching and slipping up, or you're going to be in serious trouble."

"...Well, I mean... that's true... but, how do I put it..."

"Just go home for now and come back with officials and soldiers. At that moment, Lysetite will finally realize you really are the feudal lord. I think that works well enough in its own way, don't you?"

Gaines thought about my words for a while.

".....Fine. I'll settle for that....."

He responded in a voice like a buzzing mosquito, seemingly not very pleased with the idea.

".....Fine..... then..."

He muttered and turned on his heel.

♪ *Life is hard and painful, and after the tears, blood seeps through…*

Well, since dealing with him any further was a bother, I flashed a smile.

"Right. Let's leave it at that. From now on, watch your finishing moves."

As I initiated the parting words, he gave a weak nod and walked away, humming a somewhat melancholy song. I watched his retreating figure and left the town of Lisril behind.

(Oh Life Has It's Ups and Downs: Finished)

AFTERWORD

Kanazaka: Winter sure is...

L: Waaaaah-!
Kanazaka: Wait?? What is this?? Even before greetings are finished!?!?!
L: wah wah wahhhhhhh!
Kanazaka: I know you have something to say. Use words instead of crying and getting angry.
L: Wahhh wahh wahhh.
Kanazaka: .....
L: sniffle wah!
Kanazaka: .....Is it that?
Thinking you appeared on the cover of the new edition, only for your face to be hidden by the title logo!
L: .....sniffle. That's it.
Kanazaka: To make matters worse, Subordinate S's face was visible.
L: uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!
Kanazaka: So it was that after all...
Ah! But if that's the case, Subordinate S is in danger of having your anger taken out on him!
Kanazaka: Is he safe!?!?!
L: .....wah ahaha wah- … he just.
L: wah... ...atomized... ...
Kanazaka: Uwaa!? Erased without a trace!?!?!
...This is bad. It's bad. At this rate, there's a possibility that your anger will be directed at me too... ...
I have to calm L down somehow... ... First, let's change the subject... ...
--- Well, will you, please calm down.
First, the second volume of "Slayers Smash" has safely released.
And, look look, I wrote a New Year's card this year too, a New Year's card.
As always, there’s an original drawing is by the author,

Kanazaka: Heh. I’ll use a technique specific to Kansai people to recover from a status ailment by inducing a retort.
"In honor of the Year of the Ox: L and a Cow (Partial)."
L: "Partial" means it’s just meat! ...Wait! Ha! I can talk normally again!

Kanazaka: Hah. By baiting you into a "tsukkomi" (straight-man retort), I cured your status ailment. That's a technique only a Kansai person could pull off.

Kanazaka: By the way, regarding the cow—these days, most restaurants serving A-class steak don't serve it with the fat attached like in the drawing. They usually serve the marbled red meat... but if I draw it like that, it looks like a block of jelly (yokan) rather than meat! So I intentionally drew it with the fat so people could tell.

L: No one cares about your lack of drawing skills. Even if I'm holding meat in the New Year's card, I can't actually eat it. They should have just removed the "Slayers" title from the cover of Vol. 15 so my face was visible!

Kanazaka: Don't be ridiculous! What kind of book does that? "Slayers" is the title! Though I suppose in this vast world, there might be a book without a title on the cover... but surely not for the final volume of a series!

L: Hmm... then maybe the title could be faint so you can see through it, or you have to rub it with a 10-yen coin like a scratch-off to see the face, or a sticker... there are lots of ways.

Kanazaka: Those "ways" sound like the gimmicks they use for adult magazines! Besides, if we did that, you'd probably go on a rampage screaming, "Is my face prohibited material?!"

Kanazaka: Look, whatever we say here isn't going to change the layout of a book that's already been published.

L: Fine. In that case, I'm putting everything on a future art book! That's the deal! To the **80 million fans** living in Himeji City who want to see my beautiful profile, please send letters to the editorial department requesting an art book!

Kanazaka: Why is it limited to Himeji City? And the population is way too high! Plus, you have no shame calling yourself "beautiful."

L: A request for a giant poster where it's just a close-up of me would be fine too! If these demands aren't met, the author's life is not guaranteed!

Kanazaka: I knew the blowback would hit me! What are you going to do to me?! Wait, I don't actually want to know!

L: Note: The murder weapon will be a snow crab.

L: (In a small voice) Tee-hee. Well then, see you next time!

Kanazaka: Wait, wait, calm down! You were shown properly on the color pages of *Dragon Magazine*! **L:** I should aim higher. Kanazaka: Aim higher...? **L:** Anyway, everyone, please send those letters to the editors! Kanazaka: It's fine to aim high, but when your negotiation tactic is taking a hostage, I think you've gone too far...